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# Making History Safe for Democracy: Understanding Alexis de Tocqueville's "Profoundly Ambiguous" Theory of History

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# Making History Safe for Democracy: Understanding Alexis de Tocqueville's "Profoundly Ambiguous" Theory of History

**by**

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# Dedication

For Avra

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# Abstract

## Making History Safe for Democracy: Understanding Alexis de Tocqueville's "Profoundly Ambiguous" Theory of History

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This dissertation examines the problem of historical determinism in the political thought of Alexis de Tocqueville. In Volume 2 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville criticizes historians in democratic centuries for undermining man's belief in his ability to control his own fate by reducing both individuals and nations alike to the playthings of either an "inflexible providence" or "blind fatality." And yet, as a cursory reading of both the Introduction to *Democracy in America* and the Introduction to *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution* reveals, Tocqueville himself appears to engage in the same practice. Whereas in the former he argues that men are but "blind instruments in the hands of God," in the latter he argues that men are being "driven by an unknown force." As many scholars therefore note, there appears to be a contradiction at the heart of Tocqueville's thought: on the one hand, he is overtly critical of historical determinism; on the other hand, he appears to embrace some form of it. The question that this dissertation therefore addresses is: how should we understand this contradiction given Tocqueville's oft-stated claim that his overriding concern, as both a statesman and a writer, is for the preservation of "liberty and human dignity" in a democratic age? Does Tocqueville differ from the democratic historians he criticizes? Or does he too succumb to what he calls the "mania of the century" and advance a theory of history that, whether he realizes it or not, reduces both individuals and nations alike to cogs in a historical machine?

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# Chapter 1: Tocqueville's "Profoundly Ambiguous" Theory of History

*You have not reproached me as I anticipated for seeming to fall in to the mania of the century. But I reproach myself for it because I do not want to fall into it. You absolve me, and I accuse myself. I wake up every morning obeying a general and eternal law that I did not know existed the day before. Unfortunately, there are some of those laws.*[1]

- Tocqueville to his editor, *Democracy in America*

In the Introduction to *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville observes that while a "great democratic revolution is taking place among us," it has essentially evoked two responses. While some people, he writes, view this revolution as "new and, taking it for an accident, still hope to be able to stop it," others, he writes, think it is "irresistible, because it seems to them the most continuous, oldest and most permanent fact known in history."[2] Put more simply, while some people view this revolution as contingent or a product of chance, others view it as fated or a product of necessity.

A few pages later, however, Tocqueville reveals his own position. Everywhere one looks, he declares, "events" seem to profit democracy and "all men," whether they intend to or not, help in "contributing" to its success. Regardless of their political leanings, all men have done their part. For according to Tocqueville, "Pushed pell-mell along the same path…all worked in common, some despite themselves, others without their knowledge, blind instruments in the hands of God."[3] In Tocqueville's view, then, the gradual development of the equality of conditions, of democracy, is no accident. On

[1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Liberty Fund Inc., 2009), 1285. See note "k."
[2] Tocqueville, 6.
[3] Tocqueville, 10 (emphasis mine).

the contrary, it is has the principal characteristics of what he famously calls a "providential fact." Not only, he tells us, is it "universal" and "lasting" but also "escapes every day from human power."[4] Whether they are aware of it or not, "all men" and thus "all events" serve its development.[5]

Still, as he argues at the very end of *Democracy in America*, that the revolution is no accident, that it is a "providential fact," does not mean that history is somehow determined or a product of necessity. According to Tocqueville, he is well aware of the fact that several of his contemporaries believe that "here below people are never masters of themselves" and that they obey some "insurmountable and unintelligent force that arises from previous events, from race, from soil, or from climate."[6] But as he proceeds to declare, "*those are false and cowardly doctrines that can produce only weak men and pusillanimous nations. Providence did not create mankind entirely independent or altogether enslaved*."[7]

Man, it would therefore seem, is not as powerless as Tocqueville at first appears to suggest. For as it turns out, democracy is not entirely beyond the reach of "human power," after all. While nations today cannot "make conditions" unequal, they can, Tocqueville nevertheless assures us, decide "whether equality leads them to servitude or liberty, to enlightenment or barbarism, to prosperity or misery."[8] They may be stuck with equality, but that does mean that they are somehow fated to lose their liberty. They are not predetermined to be "brought back," as Rousseau puts it in *The Second Discourse*, "to

[4] Tocqueville, 10–11.
[5] Tocqueville, 12.
[6] Tocqueville, 1284.
[7] Tocqueville, 1285 (emphasis mine).
[8] Tocqueville, 1285.

a new state of nature:" a time and place where "the notions of good and the principles of justice vanish once again."[9]

Similarly, in the Introduction to the *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, Tocqueville tells us that even "in the midst of the darkness of the future we can already discover three very clear truths," the first of which that "all the men of our days are driven by an unknown force…"[10] According to Tocqueville, sometimes this force "pushes them gently," other times violently. Either way, however, it is pushing them towards the total "destruction of aristocracy." As Tocqueville therefore presents it, this force appears to be as insurmountable as the "insurmountable and unintelligent" ones that he briefly refers to at the very end of *Democracy in America*.[11] To be sure, he never reveals what this force is. It is not clear if it "arises from previous events, from race, from soil, or from climate." What Tocqueville does tell us about this force, however, is that despite being unknown it cannot be "vanquished" and so cannot be resisted. This force, whether men like it or not, is the historical equivalent of a Leviathan: "king of all of the children of pride," the aristocratic few who otherwise refuse to accept their fate.

Even so, just as Tocqueville insists in *Democracy in America* that while human beings are "blind instruments in the hands of God," "Providence did not create mankind entirely independent or altogether enslaved," he insists in *The Ancien Regime* that while all men are being driven by an "unknown force," this force should not be mistaken as

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[9] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Second Discourse* in *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Two Discourses and the Social Contract*, ed. and trans. John T. Scott (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 115.
[10] Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, edited by J.-P. Mayer (Gallimard, 1967), 50. Translation is my own.
[11] Tocqueville, 50.

evidence of the fact that "here below people are never masters of themselves." While human beings cannot defeat this force, they can, nonetheless, hope to "regulate and slow" it.[12] For although democracy—a social-state in which people are "no longer tied to one another by bonds of caste, class, guild, or family"—is especially prone to despotism, it is democracy and not despotism *per se* that is inevitable.[13]

Thus, just as Tocqueville concludes *Democracy in America* by assuring his readers that while equality is here to stay, there are nevertheless important choices left to make, so he concludes *The Ancien Regime* by assuring his readers that while the "modern spirit" is permanent and irreversible, this spirit is manageable nonetheless. As the example of the province of Languedoc illustrates, human beings have more control over this force than one might otherwise assume. Although the modern spirit may have destroyed everything "everywhere else," explains Tocqueville, its doing so was not inevitable. In Languedoc, "rulers" rose to the occasion. They made it so "the modern spirit could peacefully penetrate [its assembly] and change everything while destroying nothing."[14] As Tocqueville therefore tells us, if not for the selfishness of statesmen "it could have been the same everywhere else," too. If only rulers had "wanted to do anything but become and remain masters," they too could have adapted institutions to the needs of modern civilization, and thus prevented the modern spirit from destroying everything in its path, as well.[15]

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[12] Tocqueville, 50.
[13] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, ed. Jon Elster, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5. Henceforth, all in-text quotations from *The Ancien Regime* are from this translation.
[14] Tocqueville, 195.
[15] Tocqueville, 195.

In sum, from his very first major work to his very last, Tocqueville appears to subscribe to a theory of history that at once denies and affirms human freedom; that at once affirms and denies some form of historical determinism. For while he seems, on the one hand, to accept the Hegelian-Kojèvian premise that history is inevitably moving (whether one likes it or not) in a certain direction—that history is determined by certain "general or eternal" laws—he in no uncertain terms rejects, on the other hand, the Marxist-Kojèvian conclusion about where history is inevitably headed. Put another way, while democracy is inevitable the "end of history" is not; while democracy is necessarily the way, a world in which there is no politics, where the human race has become a re-animalized herd of cattle that does nothing by "graze," is not necessarily the place.[16] Although the past is closed, the future somehow remains open-ended. Hence as the German thinker, Karl Löwith, argues, while Tocqueville (along with Spengler and Toynbee) seems to believe in a "historical destiny," his belief is by no means "the result of a single minded acceptance of natural fate; it is *profoundly ambiguous* because of [his] counter belief in man's responsibility for history through decisions and will—a will which is always directed to a future of indeterminate possibilities."[17]

## THE DEBATE OVER TOCQUEVILLE'S "PROFOUNDLY AMBIGUOUS" THEORY OF HISTORY

That Tocqueville scholars have spent a great deal of time and energy trying to make sense of Tocqueville's theory of history should therefore come as no surprise.

[16] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Cornell University Press, 1980); Friedrich Nietzsche, Nietzsche: *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.
[17] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (University of Chicago Press, 1957), 11 (emphasis mine).

Indeed, as Marvin Zetterbaum observes, given the profound ambiguity surrounding Tocqueville's apparently half-hearted endorsement of historical determinism, the "search for something equivalent to a philosophy of history in his writings has been carried on as avidly, and in as many directions, as the search for his true intent."[18]

What are these directions? According to Zetterbaum, they begin with Tocqueville's close friend, John Stuart Mill, who in his review of Volume 1 of *Democracy in America*, identifies Tocqueville as a disciple of the modern idea of progress. In keeping with the "foremost continental thinkers," observes Mill, Tocqueville begins from a conclusion that only but a few his English contemporaries, "in their most far-reaching speculations," have "yet arrived": that "the progress of democracy *neither can nor ought* to be stopped;" "that a progress which has continued with uninterrupted steadiness for so many centuries" can no longer "be staved…"[19] Accordingly, in Mill's view Tocqueville merely restates an argument "familiar to every continental writer with any pretensions to philosophy:" that history, like nature, "does nothing in vain;" that it is ultimately rational; that it follows certain ineluctable laws; that it is not simply an "altar on which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals are slaughtered."[20] In other words, in Mill's view, Tocqueville merely reaffirms what many

[18] Marvin Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy* (Stanford University Press, 1967), 4.
[19] John Stuart Mill, "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America," in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XVIII - Essays on Politics and Society Part I*, ed. John M. Robson, Introduction by Alexander Brady (University of Toronto Press, 1977), 50-51 (emphasis mine).
[20] Immanuel Kant, "Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" in *Kant's Political Writings*, translated by H.B. Nisbet and edited by H.S. Reiss (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43-44; Immanuel Kant, Perpetual Peace: A Philosophic Sketch in *Kant's Political Writings*, translated by H.B. Nisbet and edited by H.S. Reiss (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 108; G.W.F Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 1980), 69.

other French historians and intellectuals with whom Mill was familiar, already argue: that history is progressive.[21]

But does he? Not according to Jack Lively and Catherine Zuckert. As they argue, to identify Tocqueville as a disciple of the modern of idea of progress is to overlook certain fundamental differences between his theory of history, on the one hand, and those put forward by French historians like Condorcet, Saint-Simon, and Comte and their descendants, on the other. According to Lively, although the opening words of Tocqueville's "first major work seem to attach him firmly to a dominant theme in nineteenth century thought," he is less attached to that theme than meets the eye.[22] True, his words are *suggestive* of the idea that there is "some absolute and comprehensive causal or metaphysical or teleological pattern within the historical process."[23] Important to keep in mind, however, is that Tocqueville never explicitly advances a "schematic history based on a scientific law or metaphysical pattern which would explain and justify the inevitable course of the future into democracy by pointing out the evident course of the past."[24] Put another way, he simply does not present his readers with a clearly articulated historical system of the kind that Auguste Comte, for instance, advances. This therefore begs the question: if his theory of history does not rely on some absolute or comprehensive causal, metaphysical, or teleological pattern, then to what does it owe its

[21] See John Stuart Mill, "Essays on French History and Historians," in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XX*, ed. John M. Robson. University of Toronto Press, 1985. In these Essays, Mill surveys the interpretive of method of French historians including Voltaire, Condorcet, Saint-Simon, François Mignet, François Guizot, Augustin Thierry, and August Comte.
[22] Jack Lively, *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford University Press, 1962), 33.
[23] Lively, 33.
[24] Lively, 33.

apparent rationality? The answer, according to Lively, is that "it was not History or Progress which rendered the emergence of some form of social democracy necessary, but certain concrete psychological, social and economic conditions of contemporary society."[25] It was a combination of causes that by conspiring together made democracy necessary. Similarly and as Zuckert argues, while Tocqueville, like Hegel, "sees modern politics as the product of an historical development which limits the alternatives by bringing to light a new truth," unlike Hegel, Tocqueville "sees that there is still uncertainty with regard to the outcome."[26] For Hegel, the outcome of this historical development is the modern administrative or bureaucratic state. For Tocqueville, however, such an outcome is at most only a future possibility: a kind of despotism that democracy has to "fear."[27] For him, there is no "end" to history because as Zuckert writes, unlike Hegel he did not see "the course of history as the unfolding of one fundamental principle." Rather, he thought that "several relatively independent developments or factors have conjoined to make human beings more and more equal to another."[28]

Even so, other interpretations of Tocqueville's theory of history stress the apparently fundamental role that Tocqueville assigns to "providence." As Albert Solomon, R.P. Marcel and, most recently, Eduardo Nolla, argue, Tocqueville's theory of history is not simply derivative of those put forward by the foremost continental thinkers

[25] Lively, 33.
[26] Catherine Zuckert, "Political Sociology Versus Speculative Philosophy," in *Interpreting Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. Ken Masugi (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1991), 122.
[27] Zuckert, 123. As Zuckert puts it, "where Hegel regards the bureaucracy as the embodiment of rationality, Tocqueville worries that centralization will eventually stifle all liberty along with all initiative."
[28] Zuckert, "Political Sociology Versus Speculative Philosophy," 122.

because unlike those put forward by Condorcet, Saint-Simon, or Comte, Tocqueville's theory of history remains deferential to the theological doctrine of providence. It "combines some of the most arbitrary conclusions of the eighteenth-century rationalists and the historical school with the fundamental conceptions of religious writers"—writers, for instance, such as Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet.[29] With this, Nolla seems to agree. In his view, Tocqueville's theory of history puts him closer to Bossuet than to Guizot because, like the former, Tocqueville "believes that all the facts of history obey a divine plan, the meaning of which escapes us, but one that men can predict and whose general tendencies they can discover."[30] Consequently, rather than begin where "every continental writer with any pretensions to philosophy" (as Mill puts it) begins, these scholars argue that Tocqueville begins where Saint Augustine begins: from the premise that the world is ultimately governed, not by some law of progress but by providence. Indeed, as Solomon explains, although Tocqueville understands human existence as being "by nature historical and social," this "historical and social actuality of man is the will and the wisdom of a Divine Providence. The rise and the growth of the democratic movement points to the will of the Almighty in its irreversible process…The wisdom of Providence illuminates the direction in which mankind moves."[31]

Like Mill's "continental" interpretation, however, Solomon's, Marcel's, and Nolla's "wisdom of Divine Providence" interpretation is also questionable. For upon

[29] Marcel, *Essai Politique sur Alexis de Tocqueville* (Alcan, 1940), 86. As Marcel goes on to elaborate, "Tocqueville's striking and singular feeling…is his profound faith in the intervention of a sovereign Master in human destinies; it has a curious and anachronistic appearance and recalls imperiously Bossuet" (87).
[30] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, cxviii.
[31] Albert Solomon, "Tocqueville's Philosophy of Freedom: A Trend Toward Concrete Sociology," *Review of Politics,* Vol. 1, No.4 (1939), 410.

reflection, there is nothing all that theological about Tocqueville's invocation of providence. As Edward Gargan writes, "Tocqueville, it is true, freely used the idea that such universal results had a providential cast. Historical phenomena inviting prognosis were, as was the democratic movement, universal and durable." But as Gargan also points out, "When Tocqueville sought the sacred support of Providence to give force to his observations, the test that he employed was a profane one: the presence in any historical process of that which is constant and cumulative in impact, the extensive evidence that a process in history was unfolding toward an ascertainable present and dimly known future."[32] Consequently, for Tocqueville history is not so much governed by God's mysterious or unintelligible will as it is by an entirely discernable process. For Augustine and Bossuet, providence is a mystery; its plan cannot be subjected to an empirical test. But for Tocqueville, this is simply not the case. For him, providence is knowable by means of human reason alone. Upon reflection, therefore, Tocqueville strips providence of its orthodox meaning and thus deprives it of its "consequentialism, which is its marrow."[33]

Finally, Hayden White, offering a somewhat different interpretation of Tocqueville's theory of history, argues that far from viewing history as either progressive (like Condorcet, Saint Simon, or Comte) or providential (like Bossuet and Augustine),

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[32] Edward Gargan, "Tocqueville and the Problem of Historical Prognosis," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (January, 1963), 334.

[33] Harvey Mitchell, *Individual Choice and the Structures of History: Alexis de Tocqueville as Historian Reappraised* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 295. For more on Tocqueville's use of the phrase "providential fact" see Seymour Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization*, (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), 27-29. According to Drescher, like Beaumont, who "also clearly used 'providential fact' in a secular developmental context," Tocqueville uses the phrase to draw attention to "historical trends, and not to scriptural authority or general hypotheses about human nature."

Tocqueville regards history as fundamentally tragic. As White explains, "If Tocqueville had been an Idealist (or Organicist) thinker, he would have been impelled to see in [the transition from aristocracy to democracy] a positive growth in human consciousness in general, a growth which would have been perceivable in the increased sophistication of thought and expression in his own age over that of all previous times—in the manner of Hegel or for that matter Ranke."[34] Yet, whatever Tocqueville sees in this transition it can hardly be defined in terms of a "positive growth." As White goes on to elaborate,

> The growth which Tocqueville discerned in the [historical] process is not to be found in the progress of consciousness in general so much as in the power of the forces which alone benefit from the decline of aristocracy and the rise of democracy: the power of the centralized state on the one hand and the power of the masses on the other. And, in his view, these two forces aggregate and combine in such a way as to offer a critical threat, not only to civilization and culture as he conceived them, but also to humanity itself.[35]

In White's view, therefore, Tocqueville presents the inevitability of democracy not as a positive development but an alarming and ultimately tragic one. It is not so much evidence of the fact that history is progressive as it is that history is *regressive*, for it is not so much evidence of the fact that civilization, culture, and humanity are safe as it is that they are in grave danger. Hence as White later writes, "The whole process has the inevitability of a Tragic Drama."[36] It does not so much evoke hope as it does terror—just as it apparently did in Tocqueville himself.[37]

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[34] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 195.
[35] White, 195.
[36] White, 195.
[37] As he tells us in the Introduction to *Democracy in America*, "The entire book that you are about to read, has been written under the impression of a sort of religious terror produced in the soul of the author by the sight of this irresistible revolution that has marched for so many centuries over all obstacles, and that we still see today advancing amid the ruins that it has made."

## TOCQUEVILLE'S AUDIENCE

Now, as different as each of these interpretations of Tocqueville's theory of history may seem, they are more alike than they are dissimilar because, as it turns out, all of them suffer from the same fundamental shortcoming. Insofar as they are *all* focused on locating "something equivalent to a philosophy of history" in Tocqueville's thought, *all* of them, whether it be White's or Mill's, fail to take into account Tocqueville's paudience as a writer: statesmen. Lest one forget, "Tocqueville writes with full consciousness of the requirements of political practice; his first consideration is always the effect his thought will have on society. It is as a statesman writing for statesmen," Zetterbaum observes, "that Tocqueville is to be understood."[38] And statesmen, Tocqueville is readily aware, exhibit fundamentally different habits of the mind than do philosophers.

In a speech given to the annual public meeting of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in1852, Tocqueville says that "there are two parts of politics that must not be confused, one fixed and the other in motion."[39] The fixed part, he explains, is "political science." It is a part that is "founded on the nature of man, on his interests, on his faculties, on his needs as revealed by philosophy and history, [and] on his instincts, which change their objects according to the times without changing their nature, and which are as immortal as his race."[40] By contrast, that part of politics which is in motion is "the art of government." It is a part of politics that involves struggling "against the

[38] Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy*, 21.
[39] Alexis de Tocqueville, "Speech Given to the Annual Public Meeting of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences on April 3, 1852," translated by L. Joseph Herbert Jr. in *Alexis de Tocqueville and the Art of Democratic Statesmanship*, edited by Brian Danoff and L. Joseph Hebert Jr. (Lexington Books, 2011), 18.
[40] Tocqueville, 18.

difficulties of each day, adapting to the variety of incidents, providing for the passing needs of the moment, and calling to its aid the ephemeral passions of contemporaries."[41] Consequently, there is a tension if not opposition between these two parts of politics in that the former suggests "habits of the mind" which are "hardly favorable" to the latter. As Tocqueville explains, whereas the fixed part "enslaves" people "to the logic of ideas" and, in so doing, gives them a "taste for the fine, the delicate, the ingenious, the original," the unfixed part enslaves people to "coarse commonplaces"—commonplaces that as he proceeds to admit, are *actually* what "lead the world."[42]

To write for statesmen, therefore, requires writing in a way that somehow bridges this divide. It requires writing in a way that sometimes ignores the logic of ideas and that articulates "coarse commonplaces" or "approximations" in their stead. In fact, it may even require writing in a way that advances certain false but salutary principles.[43] In Volume 2, Part 3 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville offers his reflections on how Americans typically view the sciences. In the midst of doing so, however, he also enters into a more general discussion about "the habits of mind appropriate to action," and how these habits relate to "thought." As he explains,

> …now, the habits of mind appropriate to action are not always appropriate to thought. The man who acts is often reduced to being content with approximation, because he would never reach the end of his plan if he wanted to perfect each detail. He must rely constantly on ideas that he has not had the leisure to study in depth, for he is helped much more by the expediency of the idea that he is using than by its rigorous correctness; and everything considered, there is less risk for him in making use of a few false principles, than in taking up his time establishing the truth of all his principles. The world is not controlled by long, learned proofs. The rapid view of a particular fact, the daily study of

[41] Tocqueville, 18.
[42] Tocqueville, 18.
[43] This is an observation initially made by Zetterbaum, who quotes the same the passage. See *Tocqueville and the Problem Democracy*, 20.

> the changing passions of the crowd, the chance of the moment and the skill to grab hold of it, decide all matters there.[44]

Here, Tocqueville echoes a sentiment first expressed by Machiavelli who, at the beginning of Chapter 15 in *The Prince*, criticizes the ancients for writing about politics not with a view to what is useful or effectual, but with a view to what is imaginary and thus useless.[45] Like Machiavelli, Tocqueville points out that statesmen are not so much concerned with the truth of ideas as they are with the *expediency* of ideas because, given the nature of what they do, they have no choice *but* to be. Accordingly, for Tocqueville as for Machiavelli there is a real question as to whether statesmen should even try to act on "long learned proofs." In a perfect world, they presumably would. But perfect worlds, as Machiavelli points out, do not exist. *Statesmen do not live in them*. Advising them to act on such proofs would therefore amount to engaging in a risky venture at best and a downright irresponsible one at worst. Unlike philosophers, they do not have the leisure required for "study." They have to contend, on a daily basis, with fortune (what Tocqueville here calls "the chance of the moment"). In effect, it is much safer for both them and those they govern if, rather than adequately philosophize they at the very least adequately govern. True, this may require making use of less than true—which is also to say, somewhat false—principles. But as Tocqueville here suggests, this is a small price to pay given what is at stake.

Consequently, the fact that *The Ancien Regime*, for instance, is not as historically accurate or "true" as Tocqueville explicitly claims is hardly surprising. As François Furet

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[44] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 780–81.
[45] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince: Second Edition*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 61.

observes, Tocqueville's description of the Ancien Regime "involves a number of problems that deserve to be reviewed"—the first of which is that of its "historical accuracy."[46] According to Furet,

> …despite [Tocqueville's] close attention to certain obstacles to the exercise of power under Ancien Regime—resulting from the extraordinary diversity in customs and procedures, and in the legal status of persons and communities—Tocqueville tended on the whole to overestimate the extent of administrative centralization in the Ancien Reigme…This fundamental belief, which ultimately contradicts other statements about the limits within which royal power had to operate, makes for some strange silences or unwarranted simplifications in Tocqueville's treatment of the real historical forces of centralization.[47]

Here, Furet reveals that despite being "remarkably knowledgeable about administrative archival sources for the eighteenth century" and, moreover, having the "intelligence to look at them at both ends of the hierarchical ladder," Tocqueville erred in his analysis of certain aspects of the Ancien Regime.[48] According to Furet, Tocqueville tended to "overestimate" the extent to which it was administratively centralized and because of this, contradicted himself. Yet, if Tocqueville is writing primarily for statesmen then what Furet calls "strange silences or unwarranted simplifications" may not be as strange or as unwarranted as they appear. On the contrary, they might be entirely warranted "approximations" given Tocqueville's stated desire, as he tells us in the Introduction, "to paint a picture" that is not only "accurate" but also "*educational*."[49] Indeed, if Tocqueville's aim is to show his readers how, despite hoping "to establish institutions that were not only democratic but also free," the French Revolutionaries managed instead only to *substitute* and perfect one form of administrative tyranny for another—that is to

[46] François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 142.
[47] Furet, 144.
[48] Furet, 142.
[49] Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, 5 (emphasis mine).

say, managed only to restore and strengthen precisely what they initially sought to destroy—*why not* overestimate the extent of administrative centralization in the Ancien Regime?[50] Why not exaggerate the ironic kinship between what they destroyed, on the one hand, and what they ended up replacing it with, on the other?

The question, we might therefore conclude, is not so much whether Tocqueville has a coherent theory of history and if so, what that theory is, but rather, why Tocqueville thought it important, from the perspective of a statesman writing primarily for statesmen, to insert himself into an otherwise abstract theoretical debate about the trajectory of human history in the first place? For what reason or reasons, and hence, *to effect what political outcome or outcomes*, did Tocqueville advance what, although never fully elaborated, has the appearance of a theory of history that at once affirms and denies human freedom?

## "NEUTRALITY AND THE USE OF HISTORY:" ZETTERBAUM ON TOCQUEVILLE'S THEORY OF HISTORY

To be sure, this question is somewhat of an old one and already has a tentative answer. As intimated above, Zetterbaum is an outlier in the debate over Tocqueville's theory of history in that he actually takes into account the fact that Tocqueville writes for statesmen. Indeed, unlike the scholars above, he readily acknowledges that Tocqueville is concerned with "the art of government." Consequently, Zetterbaum provides an altogether different explanation for why Tocqueville has such a "profoundly ambiguous" theory of history.

[50] Tocqueville, 4.

According to him, despite his aristocratic upbringing and heritage, Tocqueville was at the end of the day a partisan of democracy, which he thought was at once more natural and just than aristocracy.[51] As Zetterbaum also points out, however, Tocqueville nevertheless recognized that to take a side in the contest between aristocracy and democracy would be to risk exacerbating as opposed to resolving the "main political conflict of his time."[52] As a result, rather than explicitly promote democracy, rather than extol democracy's virtues, Tocqueville chose instead to simply portray it as inevitable: as a "providential fact" beyond the reach of "human power." This way, argues Zetterbaum, Tocqueville could give himself the *appearance* of being "neutral" while at the same time focusing "men's attention on what [he] really cared about"—namely, "the task of perfecting" democracy, of "reconciling the demands justice with those of human excellence."[53] The inevitability thesis—Tocqueville's historicism—Zetterbaum therefore concludes, is but a rhetorical smoke screen: it is "the shield behind which" Tocqueville can maintain his neutrality, "a neutrality that is not only compatible with the cause of democracy, but actively promotes it."[54]

As interesting as I find this explanation, however, it is for several reasons also problematic, beginning with the fact that it simply does not comport with the subsequent notion that democracy is really a "problem," as Zetterbaum goes on to claim. According to Zetterbaum, despite its relative justice, democracy is a "problem" because it is antithetical to human excellence. "Traditionally, justice had been considered equivalent

[51] Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy*, 39.
[52] Zetterbaum, 20.
[53] Zetterbaum, viii.
[54] Zetterbaum, 20–21.

to human excellence, or at least the expression of it."[55] However, as Tocqueville presents it, not only is the relative justice of democracy *not* equivalent to human excellence, it is *undermining* of human excellence. Left unchecked, democracy's natural tendency—namely, to equalize and level everything in its path—threatens to extinguish human excellence. In turn, this will condemn otherwise free peoples to servitude because the survival of liberty ultimately depends on the survival of human excellence. Important to recognize, however, is that this articulation of democracy as a "problem" makes sense only if it is actually inevitable or "beyond" man's power, just as Tocqueville tells us. For otherwise, democracy would not really be as problematic as Zetterbaum claims. It would, in theory, remain something that is *entirely reversible* and thus *subject to* as opposed to undermining of human excellence. It would be much easier "perfect" than Zetterbaum argues.

Second, even if the inevitability thesis is, at the end of the day, nothing more than a salutary myth—a "convenient means" to convince otherwise stubborn aristocrats that democracy, whether they like it not, is here to stay—Zetterbaum overlooks the fact that such a myth would be *at least as undermining as supportive* of the task of reconciling the demands of justice with those of excellence, and hence as undermining as it is supportive of Tocqueville's project in *Democracy in America* and *The Ancien Regime*. Later on in the Introduction to *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville famously declares that a "new political science" is needed for a "world entirely new."[56] But just as it is important to recognize that democracy is a problem only to the extent that it is *actually* here to stay

[55] Zetterbaum, 41.
[56] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 16.

(ie. inevitable), so it is important to recognize that this declaration for a "new political science" makes little sense given what immediately precedes it. In the pages leading up to this declaration, Tocqueville goes out of his way to argue that democracy, as novel as it might appear, did not just come into being overnight. Rather, it took 700 years.[57] But as Tocqueville also makes clear, this 700-year transition from aristocracy to democracy had *nothing to do* with the free will of human beings, much less with their practicing some "architectonic art."[58] As noted above, the transition from aristocracy to democracy was the product of some unknown force, not simply chance. It had to do with men being used as either "blind instruments in the hands of God" or the unwitting agents of an unknown force beyond their control, not simply with them, deciding their own political fate. Consequently, to all of a sudden declare that a "new political science" is needed for a "world entirely new" is tantamount to all of a sudden granting otherwise blind human beings the gift of sight. Never mind the question of whether a new political science is "needed." This is suddenly to declare, without so much as a providing an explanation, that political science is *now possible.* It is a declaration that simply does not follow from what precedes it and is therefore as open to the accusation of being as rhetorical as the inevitability thesis itself. *Is* political science possible in world where history is apparently governed by an "unknown force"? If Tocqueville's raising this question can be interpreted as a "convenient means" to resolve the "main political conflict of his time,"

[57] Tocqueville, 8.
[58] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Barlett and Susan Colins (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1095a27-28.

then it can at the very least also be interpreted as casting more doubt on the existence of free will than seems prudent.

In fact, if one considers what Tocqueville himself writes about historians in "democratic centuries," his raising this question seems altogether imprudent. In Volume 2 of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville devotes an entire chapter to comparing and contrasting the methodological tendencies of historians in aristocratic and democratic centuries. Yet as it soon becomes apparent, the main difference between them is that whereas the former make "all events depend on the particular will and the mood certain men," the latter "attribute to the individual almost no influence on destiny of the species, or to citizens on the fate of the people."[59] In effect, whereas aristocratic historians prioritize the influence of individuals in determining the course of history (and thus implicitly grant a kind of unfettered freedom from necessity to human beings) democratic historians prioritize the influence of general causes in determining even the smallest of "particular facts" (and thus implicitly deny that human freedom understood as something separate from necessity exists).[60] Put another way, whereas aristocratic historians commit the methodological error of exaggerating the no doubt important role that human beings play in determining their own political fate, democratic historians commit the methodological error of denying that role. The end result, according to Tocqueville, is that whereas aristocratic historians, "particularly those of antiquity," teach that "in order to become master of his fate and govern his fellows, man has only to know how to control himself," democratic historians teach men "little except how to obey;" for they

[59] Tocqueville, 853.
[60] Tocqueville, 853.

ultimately teach a "doctrine of fatality" that, should it ever spread from them "to their readers, would "soon paralyze the movement of new societies and would reduce Christians to Turks."[61]

When Tocqueville's reservations about democratic historians are taken into account, therefore, his own flirtation with historical determinism comes into view as being much more problematic than it might, at first, seem. As Tocqueville goes on to point out, when compared to aristocratic peoples, democratic peoples are *already* "too inclined to doubt free will."[62] Why, then, would he risk exacerbating as opposed to mitigating this inclination? He may very well have been a partisan of democracy, but surely he could have found a better way to appear "neutral" than to embrace historicism and, in effect, risk casting more doubt on rather than bolster one's faith *in* the existence of free will.[63] To embrace such a theory is also to implicitly call into question the viability of his entire project. It is to risk being accused of precisely what he accuses others of doing: subjecting entire peoples to some "insurmountable force that arises from previous events, from race, from soil, or from climate."

Finally and, most importantly, Zetterbaum's interpretation of Tocqueville's theory of history arguably does the *mirror opposite* of the interpretations above—that is, overlooks Tocqueville's no less genuine concern for that *other* part of politics, the part he calls "science." As mentioned earlier, in his speech at the annual public meeting of the

[61] Tocqueville, 858.
[62] Tocqueville, 858.
[63] For example, he could have propagated the myth that, rather than being a chimera, a "mixed regime"—a regime in which "the demands of justice and those of human excellence" can exist in harmony—is a real possibility. This also could have had the salutary effect of bring aristocrats and republicans together and ending to the conflict of his time. In fact, many of contemporaries, the Doctrinaires, argued just this.

Academy of Moral and Political Science in 1852 Tocqueville freely admits that the scientific part of politics has a way of enslaving people "to the logic of ideas…when it is coarse commonplaces that lead the world." Still, as he goes to explain, to acknowledge the impractical nature of the former is not to say that it has *nothing* to do with latter. To argue as much, Tocqueville tells his audience, would be tantamount to arguing that political science is impossible—that *science* or philosophy has no connection with politics. Yet according to Tocqueville, this is simply not the case. "Political men," he writes, tend to think that there is "something rather puerile…in imagining that there is a particular art that teaches one to govern."[64] And for good reason: as Tocqueville readily concedes, practice is often removed from theory. To "excel at one is no reason at all to succeed in the other;" one need only consider the example of Tocqueville himself.[65] Nevertheless, as Tocqueville also argues, those who disparage theory for being impractical or useless are simply wrong. Nay, they are barbaric. For as he eventually tells his audience, "barbarians are the only people who recognize nothing but practice in politics."[66] Yes, "political science and the art of governing are two very distinct things."[67] But this does not mean that "political science does not exist or is in vain."[68] On the contrary and as the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli illustrate, there is an important connection between theory and practice such that the latter is never *fully* removed from the former and vice versa.[69]

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[64] Alexis de Tocqueville, "Speech Given to the Annual Public Meeting of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences on April 3, 1852," 17.
[65] Tocqueville, 18.
[66] Tocqueville, 20.
[67] Tocqueville, 19.
[68] Tocqueville, 19.
[69] Tocqueville, 19.

According to Zetterbaum, however, the "political men" to whom Tocqueville is in this speech referring are essentially correct because given Zetterbaum's interpretation of Tocqueville's theory of history, Tocqueville himself is one of them. In Zetterbaum's view, Tocqueville does not so much care about theory as he does about practice because he does not actually care, from a purely theoretical perspective, about the question of historical change and thus the philosophical problem of historical determinism. Rather, he cares only about whether the idea of historical determinism, *regardless if it is true*, can be used to "focus men's attention." In other words, from Zetternbaum's perspective, Tocqueville cares only about the *consequences of ideas* and not about their truth or untruth. He cares about the truth only insofar as it is either effectual or ineffectual, not for its own sake.

But is this actually the case? Does Tocqueville *only* care about the utility of ideas and not about their theoretical status (ie. whether they are true or untrue)? As many other scholars observe, it is not that simple. As Mitchell points out, although Tocqueville is known for having described philosophy to his friends as the "essence of all gibberish" and an "agony that man chooses and agrees to…inflict on himself," the fact remains: like Machiavelli, Tocqueville *"inflicted it on himself*."[70] Moreover and as Harvey Mansfield observes, while in all three of his major works Tocqueville attacks, in one way or another, philosophers and philosophy, it is important to keep in mind that these attacks are directed towards a *certain kind* of philosopher and thus a *certain kind* of philosophy. "In each of his three books," writes Mansfield, "he selects for criticism, not of any or all

[70] Mitchell, *Individual Choice and the Structures of History*, 8.

philosophers, but the foundational philosophers of liberalism, who clarify, simplify, and (less explicitly) democratize—and who, in all this, innovate."[71] Philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli—the very philosophers that Tocqueville considers exemplars of political science—get a pass. Lastly and as John Elster argues, while most people read Tocqueville as a political theorist and thus as being primarily if not exclusively concerned with practice, there is a strong case to be made that whatever his importance as a political thinker he was in no uncertain terms an important *social scientist*, as well. According to Elster, while "Tocqueville's unsystematic, not to say incoherent, analyses detract from the value of *Democracy in America* as a guide to either democracy or America," *Democracy in America* is a book that is nevertheless "filled to the brim—indeed, sometimes overflowing—with small and medium-sized causal mechanisms and highly sophisticated methodological insights…"[72] To be sure, Elster is wrong to conclude that "Tocqueville's unsystematic, not to say incoherent, analyses detract from the value of *Democracy in America*." On the contrary and as I shall argue, its value lies in precisely this. For now, however, it is important simply to note that Elster is right to point to a genuine and separate concern, on Tocqueville's part, for identifying "causal mechanisms" regardless of their practical implications.

As much as it is important to keep in mind that Tocqueville was a statesman writing primarily for statesmen, then, it is also important to acknowledge that he was not *simply or only* a statesman writing for statesmen. Indeed, he all but admits as much when

[71] Harvey Mansfield, "Intimations of Philosophy in Tocqueville's Democracy in America" in *Tocqueville's Voyages: The Evolution of His Ideas and Their Journey Beyond His Time*, edited by Christine Dunn Henderson (Liberty Fund, 2014), 125.
[72] Jon Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville, the First Social Scientist* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), vii.

in an editorial note at the very end of *Democracy in America*, he speaks directly *to* the "profound ambiguity" of his theory of history. If we recall, in closing *Democracy in America* Tocqueville tells us that those of his contemporaries who think that "peoples are never masters of themselves"—that they are obedient to some "insurmountable and unintelligent force"—teach "false and cowardly doctrines…"[73] Interestingly enough, however, in a corresponding editorial note to this passage Tocqueville, immediately after claiming that his "system" is by contrast "perfectly compatible with human liberty," nevertheless raises the question of whether or not he *too* might be guilty of teaching such a "doctrine," nonetheless. As his note reads:

> You have not reproached me as I anticipated for seeming to fall in to the *mania* of the century. But I reproach myself for it because I do not want to fall into it. You absolve me, and I accuse myself. I wake up every morning obeying a general and eternal law that I did not know the day before. Unfortunately, there are some of those laws.[74]

The "mania of the century" to which Tocqueville is referring is none other than what Léon Brunschvicg calls the "darling vice" of the "nineteenth."[75] It is the philosophy of history; the attempt to make coherent or rational (and often, *find meaning or purpose in*) what otherwise appears to be a meaningless alter on which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals are slaughtered." In other words, it is the attempt to make human history a function exclusively of necessity as opposed to chance and hence argue that humanity is governed by a superior force, whether it be "climate," "race," "soil," "civilization," "Providence," the "cunning of reason," or "economic relations." Apparently, Tocqueville expected to be reproached for "seeming" to have

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[73] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1284.
[74] Tocqueville, 1285. See note "k."
[75] Léon Brubschvicg, "History and Philosophy" in *Philosophy and History: The Ernst Cassirer Festschrift,* edited by Raymond Klibanskey and H. J. Paton (Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 30.

fallen into this mania. On the one hand, therefore, this note seems to suggest that despite appearances he did not. On the other hand, however, Tocqueville also regrettably concedes that there is a very good reason why this mania exists in the first place. As it turns out, "general and eternal" laws—laws that human beings have *no choice* but to obey—exist. This may be unfortunate, he laments. But as unfortunate as it may be, it is not something that Tocqueville was apparently willing to ignore, much less lie about. Thus, while he would rather *not* be perceived as having fallen into the mania of the century, he cannot avoid it, either. Like his contemporaries and thus like those of the democratic historians he criticizes, he too acknowledges the existence such laws, "unfortunate" as they are.

For all of these reasons, then, Zetterbaum's interpretation of Tocqueville's theory of history (an interpretation which, upon reflection, denies that he even has one) also comes into view as being problematic—which is ultimately to say that the question remains: how should we understand what Löwith aptly describes as Tocqueville's "profoundly ambiguous" theory of history?

## STRUCTURE AND ARGUMENT OF THE DISSERTATION

In 1837, Tocqueville penned a letter to Henry Reeve, his English translator, in which he wrote that while "some absolutely want to make me a party man…I am not; I am given to passions and I have only opinions, or rather I have only one passion, the love of liberty and human dignity."[76] Thirteen years later, he penned a letter to his close friend

[76] Tocqueville to Reeve, 22 March, 1837, *OC* VI, pt. 1.

Louis de Kergorlay in which wrote he has "no tradition" and belongs to "no party" because he has "no cause other than that of freedom and human dignity."[77] Finally, in his *Recollections* he writes that the only reason he decided to re-enter politics following the Revolution of 1848 was his profound concern for "liberty and human dignity."[78] Yet, as Mitchell points out, Tocqueville wanted to be remembered neither as a statesman nor as a political scientist, but "principally as a historian."[79] The question of how his theory of history either supports or, at the very least, *does not further endanger* what he apparently cared for most is therefore an important one that deserves more attention.[80] How, exactly, does Tocqueville differ from those of his contemporaries, those unnamed democratic historians, who *do* teach "false and cowardly" doctrines? Is his theory of history as "compatible" with the preservation of "liberty and human dignity" as he claims?

These questions animate the chapters that follow. In Chapter 2, I discuss the various methodological tendencies that, as briefly mentioned above, Tocqueville associates with historians in democratic versus aristocratic centuries. More specifically, I provide a plausible—which is neither to say comprehensive nor definitive—account of the origins and evolution of these tendencies in an effort to shed light on what, exactly, Tocqueville, means by "history in democratic times." Ultimately, my argument in this chapter is that by "history in democratic times" Tocqueville means "universal" or

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[77] Tocqueville to Kergolay, December 15, 1850, *OC* XIII pt. 1.
[78] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections*, ed. by Olivier Zunz and trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 77.
79 Mitchell, *Individual Choice and the Structures of History*, 4.
[80] James T. Schleifer, *The Making of Democracy in America* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund), 352. As Schleifer observes, "A strong case" can be made that "Tocqueville's most essential concern was the moral condition of mankind. He valued, above all, the freedom and dignity of the individual."

"world" history: a type of history that Löwith calls "Christian by derivation" but "anti-Christian by consequence." It is a kind of history that although theological and redemptive in origin, in its secularized form takes on the appearance of being philosophical and progressive.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the question of why the democratic mind finds this type of history so alluring. Expanding on the logic underlying Tocqueville's analysis of the democratic attraction to pantheism, I argue that the democratic attraction to "history in democratic times" stems from the widespread adoption of a philosophical method that Tocqueville at first associates with the Americans: "to seek on one's own and in oneself alone the reason for things;" to "rely solely on the unaided effort of [one's] own individual reason." More specifically, I argue that given democratic man's psychological make-up and corresponding "restlessness," he is liable to treat democratic history as a kind of ersatz religion that attaches meaning to his existence in time (history), just as pantheism attaches meaning to his existence in space (nature).

In Chapter 4, I discuss what Tocqueville diagnoses as the danger of democratic history—a danger which stems from its tendency to either explicitly or implicitly undermine man's belief in his capacity to control his own fate. Drawing on the political thought of Eric Voegelin, I begin by showing how the "gnostic attitude" characteristic of modern intellectuals more or less captures the psychology of democratic historians for whom, as Tocqueville puts it, "showing how facts happened is not enough," as well. For just as gnostic intellectuals, according to Voegelin, strive not just to interpret but rather *demonstrate their cognitive mastery over* social and political reality, so democratic historians, according to Tocqueville, have a tendency to design absolute systems which

claim to be theoretically infallible. From there, I turn to Tocqueville's correspondence with his friend and colleague Arthur de Gobineau in an effort to show how precisely by designing absolute historical systems, democratic historians end up teaching their readers a "doctrine of fatality" that reduces both individuals and nations alike to cogs in a historical machine. Essentially, my argument in this chapter is that by teaching their readers to view human beings (including themselves), not as self-legislating ends-in-themselves but as the accelerants or decelerants of an historical process beyond their control, democratic historians inadvertently promote two forms of political behavior *inimical* to the preservation of liberty and human dignity in a democratic age: what Isaiah Berlin calls "irrational passivity," on the one hand, and "irrational fanatical activity," on the other.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I take up the question of whether and to what extent Tocqueville might not also be accused of teaching his readers a doctrine of fatality that, whether he realizes it or not, reduces both individuals and nations alike to cogs in a historical machine. As we saw above, at the very end of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville raises the question of whether he himself might be guilty, like so many of his contemporaries, of implicitly teaching a philosophy of history that makes human beings obedient to some "insurmountable and unintelligent force that arises from previous events, from race, from soil, or from climate." But as I argue in this chapter, given Tocqueville's understanding of the relationship between what he calls the "cultivation of theory," on the one hand, and the "cultivation of practice," on the other, his theory of history remains much less systematic, much more political, and thus much more hospitable to (if not perfectly compatible with) the preservation of liberty and human

dignity than those of his contemporaries. Indeed, as I argue in this chapter, because Tocqueville is a historian for whom history is neither a "tale told by an idiot" (the function entirely of chance) *nor* a tale told by a prophet (the function entirely of necessity), his theory of history remains, like Montesquieu's before him, a profoundly ambiguous one that, as such, remains *much safer* for democracy than those of the democratic historians he criticizes. These other theories of history, Tocqueville tells us, are both "false and cowardly." Insofar as his own theory remains "profoundly ambiguous," however, it remains once truer and more ennobling.

# Chapter 2: On the Origins and Rise of Democratic History: Voltaire's Attack on Ancient and Christian World History

*If, back in the solitude of your dwelling, you happen to compare the man whom you have just heard with the great Christian orators of past centuries, you will discover, not without terror, what the strange power that moves the world is able to do; and you will understand that democracy, after remaking in passing all the ephemeral institutions of men, finally reaches the things most immobile by their nature, and that, not able to change the substance of Christianity, which is eternal, it at least modifies the language and the form.*[81]

-Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, in Volume 2 of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville devotes an entire chapter to comparing and contrasting the methodological tendencies of historians in democratic versus aristocratic centuries. Interestingly enough, however, scholars who write about his theory of history pay surprisingly little attention to its actual content, much less to any of the historiography or historical context informing that content.[82] In fact, of the few scholars who *are* attentive to what Tocqueville writes in this chapter, none address the question of where these tendencies originate or how, exactly, they came to be.[83]

[81] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 860.
[82] See, for instance, Cheryl B. Welch, *De Tocqueville* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 149-157; Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy, and the American Future* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 167-177; Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, "Tocqueville's New Political Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Cheryl B. Welch (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 98-102; and Harvey Mitchell, *Individual Choice and the Structures of History,* 42.
[83] See Marvin Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy*, 12-15; Peter Augustine Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 1993), 59-71; and most recently, Sara Henary, "Tocqueville and the Challenge of Historicism," *Review of Politics* Vol. 76, No. 3 (2014), 476-478.

At first, this may not seem like much of an oversight. After all, Tocqueville himself refrains from naming any of the historians he has in mind, and thus refrains from drawing our attention to any of the historiography and historical context informing what he writes in this chapter. However, as I hope to demonstrate in what follows, it is only by taking stock of this historiography and context that we can begin to understand what, exactly, Tocqueville means by "history in democratic times" and beyond that, how or in what fundamental way Tocqueville's own theory of history differs from those "false and cowardly" ones he refers to at the very end of *Democracy in America.*

Accordingly, my aim in this chapter is to bring this historiography and context to the fore. More specifically, it is to put forward a plausible—which is neither to say comprehensive nor definitive—account of the origins and rise of the various methodological tendencies that Tocqueville associates with historians in democratic centuries.[84] Beginning with my own analysis of Tocqueville's chapter on democratic historians, I then explain why precisely because of their various methodological tendencies, these historians are not only liable to build historical systems but in so doing eliminate the phenomenon of chance or "accident" from human affairs. From there, I turn to the question of which historians in particular Tocqueville has in mind and after identifying them, argue that given both their tendencies and the historical context in which they were writing, they are perhaps best characterized as the descendants of a

[84] It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to account for every twist and turn in the history of historical writing that may or may not have contributed to the emergence of what Tocqueville identifies, generally speaking, as the "tendencies peculiar to historians in democratic centuries." To accomplish that task would be to write a history of historical writing, not a dissertation on Tocqueville and the problem of historical determinism. If the argument advanced in this chapter therefore seems less than incontestable, that is because it is not meant to be incontestable. It is meant only to serve as a plausible starting point for understanding Tocqueville's own theory of history.

historiographical tradition that begins well before the advent of democracy and that in fact traces all the way back to Saint Augustine. Finally, I discuss the singularly important role that the irreligious Voltaire plays in liberating this historiographical tradition from its theological roots and, in effect, initiating a revolution in historical writing that culminates in the replacement of Christian world or universal history with what Tocqueville understands as "history in democratic times." Ultimately, I argue that democratic history is what Löwith calls "Christian by derivation" but "anti-Christian by consequence:" a type of history that like Christian world history tends to be universal in scope and meaningful (teleological) in its orientation but that, unlike Christian world history, is *philosophical* and *progressive* as opposed to *theological* and *redemptive* in its overall character.

## "Some Tendencies Particular to Historians in Democratic Centuries:" Tocqueville on the Methodological Tendencies of Democratic Historians

"Historians who write in aristocratic centuries," begins Tocqueville in Chapter 20, Part 1, Volume 2 of *Democracy in America*, tend to do the following: make all events depend on the "particular will" and "mood" of "certain men;" "readily link the most important revolutions to the slightest accidents;" "wisely make the smallest causes stand out;" and overlook or fail to see "the greatest ones."[85] Alternatively, historians in democratic centuries tend to do the opposite. Rather than make all events depend on the particular will and mood of certain men, "most of them," writes Tocqueville, "attribute to the individual almost no influence on the destiny of the species, or to citizens on the fate

[85] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 853.

of the people." Moreover, rather than readily link the most important revolutions to the slightest accidents, they "attribute general causes to the smallest, most particular facts." Finally, rather than "wisely" make the smallest causes stand out, historians in democratic centuries overlook their very existence. More often than not, all they see are "the greatest ones."[86]

According to Tocqueville, these contrasting tendencies "can be explained;" one need only refer back to the usual suspect, the equality of conditions, and take note of its impact on how historians perceive and interpret what takes place on the "world stage."[87] In aristocratic centuries, this equality is non-existent. Thus, when aristocratic historians cast their eyes upon the world stage, they see a great disparity among individuals in terms of status, wealth, and power. Some of these individuals come into view as being immensely powerful. The vast majority of others, however, remain obscure in their powerlessness. At a glance, therefore, a few great individuals tend to stand out amongst "the many" and in doing so become a natural focus point and unit of analysis for the historian. Because their commanding presence overshadows that of any other causal variable, they and often they alone are cast as the movers and shakers of history. By contrast, in democratic centuries the equality of conditions is pervasive. As a result, when democratic historians cast their eyes upon the "world stage" they see little if any disparity among individuals in terms of status, wealth, and power. It therefore becomes extremely difficult for these historians to point to any one individual "who exercises a very great or,

[86] Tocqueville, 853.
[87] At one point, this chapter was titled "Influence of Equality of Conditions on the Manner of Envisaging and Writing History."

above all, a very enduring power" over the many, and so "the many"—which in the context of modern democracy, ultimately means humanity or the species as a whole—comes to replace "the few" as a natural focus point and unit of analysis for the historian.[88]

Not surprisingly, therefore, whereas aristocratic historians focus on the determining role that certain great individuals play in shaping history, democratic historians focus on the determining role that "general causes" play in shaping history. As regards aristocratic historians, "the importance of the things that they see a few men do gives them an exaggerated idea," writes Tocqueville, "of the influence that one man is able to exercise, and naturally disposes them to believe that you must always go back to the particular action of an individual to explain the movements of the crowd."[89] Hence in composing their histories aristocratic historians naturally look for that which aristocratic peoples in general look for in the theater: "great lords" and "kings."[90] They "notice first of all a very small number of principal actors who lead the whole play" and "who keep themselves at the front of the stage."[91] After noticing this very small number of principal actors, however, their search for causes suddenly stops. Rather than look for that which *in addition* to principal actors shapes history—that which is operating "behind the scenes," so to speak—aristocratic historians opt instead to focus on uncovering what Tocqueville calls "the secret motives" that make these great individuals "act and speak."[92] They turn to the psychology of statesmen, not the political, economic, and sociological conditions in which statesmen have little or no choice but to operate. As regards democratic

[88] Tocqueville, 854.
[89] Tocqueville, 854.
[90] Tocqueville, 848.
[91] Tocqueville, 854.
[92] Tocqueville, 854.

historians, however, they again do the opposite. The unimportance of the things that they see men do gives them an exaggerated idea of the lack of influence that one man is able to exercise, which in turn naturally disposes them to believe that you must always look for a "general cause" to explain the movements of the crowd. Unlike their aristocratic counterparts, then, democratic historians notice first of all a very large number of insignificant actors, none of which "lead the whole play" and none of which keep themselves "at the front of the stage." Their search for causes is therefore a much more prolonged and tiring one. They are liable to become lost amid a "labyrinth" of that which democratic peoples in general look for in the theater: a "confused mixture" of "conditions," "sentiments," and "ideas."[93] Hence, "not able to succeed in seeing clearly and in bringing sufficiently to light individual influences," they tend to write instead about the determining role of that which affects everyone, equally. They tend to write about general causes such as "the nature of races, the physical constitution of a country, the spirit of civilization."[94] Unable to trace the influence of principal actors whatsoever, democratic historians tend focus almost entirely if not exclusively on that which is behind the scenes.

So it follows that unlike their aristocratic forerunners, democratic historians are liable to design or "create" what Tocqueville calls "historical systems." According to Tocqueville, because historians in aristocratic centuries are "diverted at every moment towards individuals, the sequence of events escapes them." In fact, they do not even

[93] Tocqueville, 848.
[94] Tocqueville, 855.

believe in a "such a sequence."[95] Given their methodological focus, the "thread of history" remains elusive, and so they come to doubt if not deny its very existence. Their inordinate focus on and often exaggerated belief in the influence of individuals disposes them to think of history as a function primarily of accident or chance. By contrast, democratic historians essentially take for granted that such a "thread" exists. "Not only are historians who live in democratic centuries drawn to giving a great cause to each fact, but also they are led to linking facts and making a system emerge," writes Tocqueville.[96] For by seeing "far fewer actors and many more actions," they "can easily" do what aristocratic historians, by virtue of seeing only the opposite, cannot: "establish a relationship and a methodical order among them."[97] Consequently, "ancient literature, which has left us such beautiful histories, offers not a single great historical system, while the most miserable modern literatures are swarming with them," writes Tocqueville.[98] Given their bird's eye view of the world stage, democratic historians are liable to connect everything they see together into a coherent whole—to write *philosophical* as opposed to political history—and hence systematize or make rational what otherwise appears confused and absurd.

So it *also* follows, therefore, that unlike their aristocratic predecessors, democratic historians are liable to believe that what happens in the world is ultimately the function of some kind of nebulous "superior force;" that the "thread of history" is but the product of

[95] Tocqueville, 857.
[96] Tocqueville, 857.
[97] Tocqueville, 857.
[98] Tocqueville, 857.

some kind of unseen first mover which determines the actions of both individuals and nations alike. As Tocqueville writes:

> When the trace of the action of individuals or nations becomes lost, it often happens that you see the world move without uncovering the motor. Since it becomes very difficult to see and to analyze the reasons that, acting separately on the will of each citizen, end by producing the movement of the people, you are tempted to believe that the movement is not voluntary and that societies, without knowing it, obey a superior force that dominates them.[99]

In Chapter 11 of *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes explains why "curiosity" or the "love of knowledge of causes" prompts human beings to not only look for causes behind effects but causes behind causes until, of necessity, they arrive at "this thought at last: that there is some cause whereof there is no former cause, but is eternal, which is it men call God."[100] Here, Tocqueville makes a similar observation—albeit as it relates to democratic historians and hence to causality in time (history) as opposed to space (nature). Although they can see the "world move," he explains, democratic historians have trouble seeing what, in particular, moves the world. Consequently, they not only are liable to do what curious human beings in general are liable to do, but also, liable to become what human beings in general are liable to become: believers in a "superior force," a "power" or "agent invisible" to borrow Hobbes's language, which alone is responsible for setting things in motion. Democratic historians are liable, in short, to furnish their historical systems with some kind of "motor"—a metaphysical or physical guarantee (a 'necessity')—on which the theoretical integrity their systems ultimately depend.

[99] Tocqueville, 857.
[100] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Edwin Curley (Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), XI.25-27.

Finally, so it follows that whereas historians in aristocratic centuries tend to attribute much to accident (chance) and little if anything to necessity, historians in democratic centuries tend to attribute nothing to accident and everything to necessity. In a lengthy footnote, Tocqueville tells us that "there are two ideas in this chapter which must not be confused," both of which have to do with the question of what, exactly, qualifies as an "accident."[101] On the one hand, he explains, an accident is the influence that a powerful individual, "like Napoleon," can exert over the "destiny of a people."[102] That such an individual's influence is never, strictly speaking, *necessary* ie. fated, means that at a fundamental level it remains undetermined ie. a function of chance as opposed to necessity. On the other hand, however, an accident can also be something that, according Tocqueville, is "due" completely to "chance," such as a "plague" or "the loss of a battle;" for just as the spread of a plague is, at the end of day, beyond the control of any one doctor so the loss of a battle is beyond the control of any one field commander. Regardless of their respective competencies or capabilities, neither is so competent (virtuous, as Machiavelli would say) as to be capable of eradicating, in its entirety, disease on the one hand or cowardice on the other.[103] While "you can" thus "refuse to believe in the influence of individuals," writes Tocqueville, you can retain a belief in the influence of "accidents"—even though, as he ultimately concludes, that "when you go back to the origin of accidents, you almost always arrive at individual action."[104] Accordingly, whereas aristocratic historians tend to write exclusively about the nature of

[101] Tocqueville, 855.
[102] Tocqueville, 855.
[103] Tocqueville, 855.
[104] Tocqueville, 855.

"accidents"—in that they are primarily if not exclusively concerned with analyzing individual action—democratic historians tend to write primarily exclusively about the contrary, about "necessity." As Tocqueville tells us, whether it be in the form of a powerful individual *or* the loss of a battle, they refuse to believe in accidents. For democratic historians, "the nature of some battle" has no bearing on whether a nation survives. When a nation perishes, it is because there is "a sequence of old causes that destined it *invincibly*" to do so.[105]

In sum, the problem for democratic historians is that unlike aristocratic historians, they often find themselves at a loss when it comes to knowing where to begin. Like all historians, their aim is to provide some coherent account of political or social change. To do so, however, they must navigate a labyrinth of confused conditions, sentiments, and ideas that aristocratic historians either need not or simply fail to navigate, thereby making it extremely difficult for them provide such an account. It therefore becomes "tempting," as Tocqueville puts it, for them to "believe" that this labyrinth is less labyrinthian than it initially appears—that behind the *chaos* actually lies some kind of *cosmos*—and that social and political change is ultimately the function of some unobservable, dominating, "superior force." Simply put, it becomes tempting for democratic historians to (whether out of frustration or hubris or both) eliminate the phenomenon of accident from human affairs altogether by attributing everything that happens in the world to either a "blind fatality" or "inflexible providence"—a rigid chain of causality that according to Tocqueville, "envelops the entire human species and binds it."[106]

[105] Tocqueville, 855 (emphasis mine).
[106] Tocqueville, 858.

## TOCQUEVILLE'S DEMOCRATIC HISTORIANS: FRANÇOIS MIGNET AND THE RESTORATION LIBERALS

Now, given the nature of these tendencies one might well assume that Tocqueville's chapter on democratic historians is a chapter about German contributions to the philosophy of history. After all, thinkers like Kant, Hegel, and Marx are not only renowned for having systematized history, but also, for having argued that all historical change is the function, essentially, of a "superior force" (the "willing of Nature;" the "cunning of Reason;" and "economic relations," respectively).[107] At the time of writing Volume 2 of *Democracy in America*, however, Tocqueville was not yet acquainted with their thought—that is, at least not directly.[108] Indeed, it was only in 1843 when his friend, Arthur de Gobineau (whose thought and correspondence with Tocqueville we shall turn to in Chapter 4), wrote for him an essay titled "Coup d'oeil générale sur l'histoire de la morale" (an essay which summarizes German contributions to the philosophy of history) that he apparently became aware of their respective historical systems.[109] The question that therefore remains is *who are* Tocqueville's democratic historians? To whom, exactly, is Tocqueville referring in this often-overlooked chapter?

To be sure, the text of the chapter itself leaves few, if any, telling indications and for good reason: as Robert T. Gannett observes, "in keeping with a lifelong policy of 'systematic' discretion, Tocqueville never broadcast his links with his sources."[110] Only

[107] Kant, "Perpetual Peace," 112–13; Hegel*, Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 89.
[108] I say "at least not directly" because, as we shall see below, insofar as many of the historians he is talking about in this chapter were heavily influenced by German thought, he was at the very least indirectly aware of it.
[109] Mitchell, *Individual Choice and the Structures of History*, 31.
[110] Robert T. Gannett Jr, *Tocqueville Unveiled: The Historian and His Sources for The Old Regime and the Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 12.

in the *Recollections* does he name names, and only does he do so because the *Recollections*, unlike either *Democracy in America* or the *Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, is apparently "not intended for public viewing."[111] Luckily for us, however, the text of the chapter itself is not the only place to look for clues. There are also Tocqueville's corresponding editorial notes in which he *does* broadcast his links with his sources and in which, near the beginning of this chapter, he writes the following: "Historians of antiquity did not treat history like Mignet and company."[112]

Concerning "Mignet," Tocqueville is referring to his friend and colleague, François Mignet, with whom he worked at the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences.[113] The "most scholarly French historian of the first half of the nineteenth century" (as Harry Barnes describes him) Mignet "made an implied attack on the Bourbon restoration" in his *History of the French Revolution*." More specifically, he argued that the Revolution was "the *necessary and inevitable* outgrowth of the tendencies of the age and as the dawn of a new and better era in the history of the world."[114] As even a cursory reading of his *History* therefore reveals, Mignet exhibits precisely those

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[111] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 3. Of course, whether Tocqueville's *Recollections* is actually a painting "not intended for public viewing" is another question. At the very beginning of the work, Tocqueville assures us that it is. However, at one-point he writes that "a parliamentary orator whom I prefer not to name once said to me…" (65). This begs the question: if the Recollections is "not intended for public viewing," then why not name this parliamentary orator? For more on the question of whether Tocqueville intended the *Recollections* for public viewing, see Harvey Mansfield, *Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 102-107.

[112] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 853. See note "b."

[113] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*, ed. and trans. by John Lukacs (Anchor Books, 1959), 224 (hereafter cited as *Correspondence*). In a letter to Gobineau dated August 8, 1843, Tocqueville writes that "I shall deflect the fulminations of my friend Mignet, who will leave me alone so long as he has you [Gobineau] for a target."

[114] Harry Elmer Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1963), 215 (emphasis mine).

tendencies that historians in democratic centuries, according to Tocqueville, are liable to exhibit.

To begin with, he focuses almost exclusively on general causes. Rather than identify all of the "fortuitous" and "secondary" causes that in times of equality are "infinitely more varied, more hidden, more complicated, less powerful, and consequently more difficult to disentangle," he discusses the determining role of nebulous social and economic factors—in particular, "class." Mignet therefore pays little attention to the influence of individuals and, on the rare occasions that he does, he does so only to point out that they are either less influential or less responsible for their actions than is generally assumed.[115] For Mignet, individuals remain "defined by their roles" and their roles "defined by the external pressures of social change."[116]

Second, Mignet renders systematic that which on the surface presents itself as inherently chaotic. He identifies "phases" of (or rather, *imposes phases* on) history that do not obviously exist and therefore structures history in such a way as to make it philosophically coherent (rational).[117] He "[clings] to the idea," as Ceri Crossley

[115] François Mignet, *The French Revolution from 1789 to 1815* (P. F. Collier & Son Company, 1932), 219; 222; 494-495. In these pages, he consistently characterizes both Robespierre, "a man of ordinary talents and vain character," and Napoleon, "the child of war," as either beneficiaries or victims of their respective circumstances, that is, as products entirely of their environment.
[116] Ceri Crossley, *French Historians and Romanticism: Thierry, Guizot, the Saint-Simonians, Quinet, Michelet* (Routledge, 2002), 33.
[117] François Mignet, *The French Revolution from 1789 to 1815*, 18-19. According to Mignet, the period between 1789 and 1815 includes two distinct phases. The first phase is a "destructive" one—the "epoch of the revolution"—that lasts from 1789 to 1795, while the second phase is a "constructive" one that lasts from 1795 to 1815. During the first phase, he explains, France experienced three successive forms of government (the States-General and National Constituent Assembly, the Legislative Assembly, and the National Convention) as well as the rise and fall of Robespierre, chief architect of the Terror. Alternatively, during the second phase, France experienced another three successive forms of government (the Directory, the Consulate, and the First Empire) and the rise and fall of Napoleon, Robespierre's apparently "constructive" analog.

observes, "that beneath the shifting, unpredictable surface of events, forces [are] at work constructing a new order, that the spectacle of violence and disillusion [is] not the whole story, that in a mysterious way disintegration [confirms] the national will."[118] In short, Mignet clings to the idea that beneath the chaos lies some kind of cosmos and hence that what otherwise appears absurd is in actuality the playing out of a rational, meaningful, process.

Finally, Mignet attributes all historical change to a "superior force"—what he terms "the necessity of things"—and therefore leaves nothing in history (no event and no personality) to chance.[119] In his view, accident plays no role in shaping the outcome of events; contingency is non-existent. Just as the Revolution in general is a function of the "necessity of things," so too is the Terror in particular. And just as the emergence of Robespierre is a result of the events that preceded his rise, so too is the emergence of Napoleon. In effect, the thread of history not only exists but for Mignet is binding. It is a thread that the "necessity of things" and *not* the accidental influence of individuals (as Tocqueville characterizes it), determines, rendering the otherwise accidental, seemingly undetermined influence of certain individuals as determined as anything else.

The same, however, can be said of many other French theories of history during the Bourbon Restoration, including especially those put forward by the "company" Mignet apparently kept. If we recall, in the editorial note quoted above, Tocqueville does not simply single out Mignet. Rather, he singles out "Mignet and company." Who is this

[118] Crossley, 31.
[119] Yvonne Knibiehler, *Naissance des sciences humaines: Mignet et l'histoire philosophique au XIXe siècle* (Flammarion, 1973), 27. According to Knibiehler, the phrase "the necessity of things" appears so frequently in his work that it might as well be called a "leitmotif" of his thought.

"company"? Unfortunately, Tocqueville does not elaborate. However, thanks to a letter written by German philosopher, Fredrich Engels, in 1894 (a letter that we shall return to at the beginning of Chapter 4), one can make an educated guess. In it, Engels answers two questions posed by the German economist Walther Borgius concerning the Marxist conception of history, one of which pertains specifically to the role that individuals like Napoleon and Caesar in shaping it. In the course of doing so, however, he also states the following: "While Marx discovered the materialistic conception of history, *Thierry, Mignet, Guizot* and all the English historians up to 1850 are the proof that it was being striven for, and the discovery of the same conception by Morgan proves that the time was ripe for it and that indeed it *had* to be discovered."[120]

As regards "Morgan," Engels is referring to the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan who, in 1877, published a book called *Ancient Society* in which he argues that while it is "undeniable that portions of the human family have existed in a state of savagery, other portions in a state of barbarism, and still other portions in a state of civilization…these three distinct conditions are connected with each other in a natural as well as *necessary sequence of progress*."[121] Alternatively and as regards "all the English historians up to 1850," Engels is most likely referring to a group of historians commonly called the "Whig Historians" of the 19th century. In his seminal *The Whig Interpretation of History*, Herbert Butterfield identifies a group of mostly British historians including

[120] Friedrich Engels, "Engels to W. Borgius, January 25, 1894" in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works Vol. 50: Letters from 1892-1895* (Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 265. (emphasis mine). Although this letter was at one-point thought to be addressed to "Starkenburg," it eventually came to light that its actually addressee was Walther Borgius.
[121] Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society: Or, Researches in the Line of Human Progress from Savagery Through Barbarism to Civilization* (C. H. Kerr, 1877), 3 (emphasis mine).

Lord Acton who, according to him, exhibit in varying degrees the same "unexamined habit of mind." All of them, he argues, exhibit what "might be called the historian's 'pathetic fallacy.' It is the result of the practice of abstracting things from their historical context and judging them apart from their context—estimating them and organizing the historical story by a system of direct reference to the present."[122] In other words, it is the result of systematizing the past for the sake of justifying the present ie. rendering the present the necessary or inevitable outcome of a long progression of seemingly unconnected chance occurrences and political events.[123] Finally (and for our purposes, most importantly), with regard to "Thierry, Mignet, and Guizot," Engels is referring to a group of French historians known collectively as the "Restoration Liberals"—a group of historians who as Stanley Mellon argues, realized that "one of the best ways to absolve the Revolution of any guilt was to insist that it *had to be*, that it had been a long time in the making, that it represented an accumulation of history, and therefore that to deny it was to deny time itself."[124]

According to Mellon, this group of historians includes François Mignet, Mme de Staël, Augustin Thierry, François Guizot, Edgar Quinet, August Trognon, Victor Cousin, Jules Michelet, Théodore Jourffroy and Adolphe Thiers—all of whom turned to writing history, he argues, in order to "sell the French Revolution."[125] In their view, a restored

[122] Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Norton, 1965), 30–31.
[123] For more on the connection between "Whig History" and Marxism, see Kevin Sharpe, *Remapping Early Modern England: The Culture of the Seventeenth-Century Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6. As Sharpe points out, in both there is a "connection between material progress and the course of history."
[124] Stanley Mellon, *The Political Uses of History: A Study of Historians in the French Restoration* (Stanford University Press, 1958), 18. Interestingly, at one-point Mellon refers to these historians as writing their own version of "Whig" history (30).
[125] Mellon, 18.

monarchy threatened to destroy all that the Revolution—as regrettably destructive as it became—had accomplished. "Napoleon Bonaparte, while carrying the Revolution to Europe, had sought to end it at home, to reconcile the two Frances under the imperial palladium. But with the return of the Bourbons in 1814," writes Mellon, "all the old questions [were] reopened." Was France "to return to an ante-bellum 1789? What part of the Revolution—if any—[could] be maintained?"[126] For those nobles and conservatives who fled it, the answer was clear: *none of it* could be maintained. The Revolution, they thought, was a mistake: an accident. It represented nothing more or less than an aberration from history and the Terror, culminating in the regrettable act of regicide, proved as much. The Restoration, they therefore argued, was a long overdue course correction—a return to homeostasis within the French body-politic.[127] In effect, they placed their liberal opponents in a precarious situation. With the monarchy restored, partisans of the Revolution were left with one of two options: capitulate or resist; accept the conservative interpretation of the Revolution as an accident, on the one hand, or counter it with an interpretation of their own that emphasized its "necessity," on the other. Not surprisingly, therefore, they decided to do the latter. In order to "defend the Revolution and its heritage," the above individuals turned to writing, or rather, *re-writing* French history. As Mellon explains:

> The first political task faced by the Liberals—that group which, in speaking for the Revolution, represented everyone from the Doctrinaires to the Jacobin Left—was to sell the French Revolution. Their very existence during this period depended upon their ability to justify the Revolution, to acquit it of crimes, to explain away its criminals. There was no better and safer way to do this during the Restoration than to write history.[128]

[126] Mellon, 5.
[127] Mellon, 5.
[128] Mellon, 3.

The reason why this was determined to be the safest way to accomplish the task is fairly obvious: at a time in which "it was difficult, even treasonable, to proclaim the political principles of the Revolution," writing history allowed them to defend that which was regarded as unpopular at best and indictable at worst.[129] The reason that there was no *better* way to accomplish the task, however, is because the genre of history, especially when compared to that of poetry, has a less than obvious rhetorical advantage: it claims to be true.

## THE RHETORICAL ADVANTAGE OF HISTORY

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes between poetry and history not so much by reflecting on how historians versus poets "speak," but by reflecting on what the former versus the latter *speak to*, respectively. As Aristotle explains, "the historian and the poet do not differ by speaking in meters or without meters."[130] If Herodotus were to speak in meters instead of prose, he would not suddenly become a poet. He would simply become a historian who writes history in meters. No, the historian and the poet, writes Aristotle, "differ in this: the one speaks of what has come to be while the other speaks of what sort would come to be."[131] In other words, whereas the historian speaks to the past—to things that in no uncertain terms *have happened*—the poet speaks to the future—to things that *may happen* and, as a result, remain by definition uncertain. Unlike poetry, then, history is unique in that it purports to be rooted in and concern itself exclusively with facts.

[129] Mellon, 6.
[130] Aristotle, *On Poetics*, trans. Seth Benardete and Michael Davis (St. Augustine's Press, 2002), 1451b.
[131] Aristotle, 1451b.

But this begs the question: what exactly is a fact? According to Harvey Mansfield, Machiavelli is the one who introduces the idea of "fact" to political philosophy.[132] Although he writes that it is "fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it," the phrase "effectual truth could also be translated as…the factual truth."[133] A "fact" is therefore an "effect, not a cause…" Unlike effects, causes are often invisible and, as such, are often imagined and easily ignored. Effects, on the other hand, are "visible, unmistakable, impossible to be ignored." They are something people actually experience or observe and hence are indisputable in a way that causes, which are at best every only assumed to exist, are not. Consequently, unlike disputable first causes (like God, for instance) facts actually hold out the promise of being reasoned from in an objective as opposed to subjective manner.[134] They actually hold out the promise, for instance, of grounding political science on truth as opposed to mere opinion—just as Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, claims he has done.

That history purports to be concerned only with recounting facts, then, means that it presents itself as being inherently trustworthy in a way that neither poetry nor philosophy, let alone revelation, can present themselves. Continuing his analysis of poetry and history in the *Poetics*, Aristotle notes that just as "we do not trust to be possible the things that have not yet come to be, so it is evident that the things that came to be are possible, for otherwise they would not have come to be…"[135] As a genre, poetry

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[132] Harvey C. Mansfield, "Nature and Fact in Tocqueville's Democracy in America," in *Nature in American Philosophy: Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, ed. Jean De Groot, vol. 42, (Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 111.
[133] Mansfield, 112.
[134] Mansfield, 112.
[135] Aristotle, *On Poetics*, 1451b.

is therefore less trustworthy than history. It does not confine itself to recounting facts. It entertains things that have *not yet and may never* come to be. It therefore precludes itself from being able to claim that what it teaches or argues, what it wishes to convey to the reader, is necessarily accurate or reliable. Because history, however, *does* confine itself to what it claims is indisputable truth, its reputation stands or falls on the presumption that what it teaches is reliable and hence that what it teaches is actual knowledge as opposed to mere opinion: "real" instead of "ideal."

And herein lies history's rhetorical advantage: it can be used to disguise that which is unreliable and unreal as reliable and real, and thus to dress up mere opinion *in the garb* of actual knowledge. As Geoffrey Vaughan observes, in *Leviathan* Thomas Hobbes, Aristotle's great nemesis, identifies "two problems" with the genre of history "that he did not raise elsewhere." Whereas the first problem is that "the details presented as facts in a history cannot be assured," the second problem is the "use to which history can be put, whether intentional or unintentional."[136] The details presented as facts cannot be assured because the status of details as facts ultimately rests on *how* facts—via the historian—have been interpreted. Alternatively, the intended purpose of history depends on the *reason* for presenting details as facts to begin with. To what end is a given historian presenting a set of given details as facts? A recognition of the first problem therefore leads to an awareness of the second and, with that, a realization of the possibility that writing a history (as opposed to a political treatise or tract) may well be the *best way* to advance an entirely political teaching.

[136] Geoffrey M. Vaughan, *Behemoth Teaches Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Political Education* (Lexington Books, 2007), 83.

This is not only what Hobbes in *Behemoth or the Long Parliament* arguably does, but also and for our purposes, precisely what many of the Restoration Liberals did. These individuals came to realize that, because of the presumption of its content (that it is "true" or rooted in "fact"), the genre of history could be used to facilitate the transmission of otherwise contentious political opinions without ever being detected. In other words, they came to realize that history could be used as a "trojan horse" for the Revolution: a covert vehicle for keeping it alive during the Restoration. Writing history allowed them to present their otherwise punishable-by-death political beliefs as indisputable "facts," and thus render their own respective interpretation of the Revolution as something "inevitable" or "necessary" (as opposed to "accidental") *incontestable*—that is, as something "beyond politics" or, to use a more contemporary phrase, as something "post-partisan." In short, it allowed them to do what political progressives in general do when it comes to defending their political opinions: invoke the weight and force of "History" in order to make them *seem* or *appear* less politically contentious than they actually are.[137]

## "Spiritual Crisis" and the Search for Meaning

From a purely political perspective, invoking the weight or force of "History"—in a way like the will of God or Providence—to defend less than true, partisan opinions may seem like a clever rhetorical tactic. However, just as it would be overly simplistic if not cynical to reduce the invocation of history by political progressives to mere rhetoric, so

[137] See Harvey Mansfield, "What Obama Isn't Saying: The Apolitical Politics of Progressivism," *Weekly Standard*, Feb. 8, 2010. As Mansfield explains, "non-partisanship in politics is inherent in the idea of progress" because "what every progressive wants is to put the particular issue he espouses beyond political dispute." Depending on the issue, however, conservatives also want this and so also invoke, for instance, the "ash-heap of history" in an attempt to put a particular issue beyond political dispute.

too would it be overly simplistic to reduce the essentially liberal enterprise of writing history during the Bourbon restoration to a concern for politics alone.[138] To be sure, politics mattered. But just as progressives are often as hopeful as they are cunning and thus, often *sincerely convinced* that "History" (in a way like God or Providence) is on their "side"—that the "arc of history" *does*, in fact, "bend toward justice"—so too were many of the democratic historians listed above *sincerely convinced* that what they were doing was more than just "selling" the Revolution.[139]

Early on in Part 1, Volume 2 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville tells us that while "the Americans have a democratic social-state and a democratic constitution," they "have not had a democratic revolution." They did not need to.[140] Because they "arrived on the soil that they occupy more or less as we see them," they were already equal in condition and hence *already* democratic in their mores.[141] The French, however, *did* experience a democratic revolution, which is to say that their democratic social-state and constitution came at the cost of having all of their "ancient beliefs" turned "upside down," first. So it follows that everything Tocqueville says in the Introduction of regarding the "democratic revolution taking place among us" has considerably less to do with the Americans than it does with the French. True, at one-point Tocqueville writes

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[138] I therefore agree and in part disagree with Mellon's thesis in *The Political Uses of History* and Zetterbaum's thesis in *Tocqueville and The Problem of Democracy*—something I will return to in Chapter 5.

[139] According to the website "The American Presidency Project," over the course of his Presidency President Obama stated more than 20 times that "the arc of history bends towards justice."

[140] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 708.

[141] Tocqueville, 708. In Part 1, Volume 1, for instance, Tocqueville argues that "The emigrants who came to settle the shores of New England all belonged to the comfortable classes of the mother country. Their gathering on American soil presented, from the beginning, the singular phenomenon of a society in which there were neither great lords, nor lower classes, neither poor, nor rich, so to speak" (53).

that much of what is taking place is "not only particular to France." But this is not to say that what *is* taking place *necessarily* applies to America, as well; for as he later writes,

> There is a country in the world where the great social revolution that I am speaking about seems more or less to have reached its natural limits; it came about there in a simple and easy way, or rather it can be said that this country sees the results of the democratic revolution that is taking place among us, without having had the revolution itself.[142]

If they had actually experienced a democratic revolution, the Americans, Tocqueville here suggests, would not have had it so "easy." They would have experienced and suffered what the French, by contrast, experienced and suffered and, as a result, more than likely would have found themselves in the same situation in which the French eventually found themselves: one of moral, political, and perhaps most importantly, intellectual chaos.

According to Tocqueville, French society once enjoyed "several kinds of happiness." The nobles looked after the people like shepherds after a flock, while the people, "not having conceived the idea of a social state other than their own," not only respected but even "loved" the nobles. A kind of "reciprocal benevolence" existed among them. Customs and mores, not laws and institutions, "founded a kind of right in the very midst of force," he tells us.[143] Then came the Revolution—a catastrophic political event that in one fell swoop destroyed this "reciprocal benevolence" and there with it, this particular "kind of right." France descended into chaos: in place of the "several kinds of happiness" that society once enjoyed, there emerged several kinds of misery that it came to suffer. In place of a reciprocal benevolence on the part of the nobles and the people there grew a kind of mutual hatred on the part of the "rich and the poor;" and in place of

[142] Tocqueville, 26–27.
[143] Tocqueville, 19–20.

"a kind of right in the very midst of force" emerged "force alone."[144] Rather than transform society for the better, the Revolution—at least initially—made for a world where, as Tocqueville at one-point summarizes, nothing remained "connected; where virtue [was] without genius, and genius without honor; where love of order [merged] with the taste for tyrants and the holy cult of liberty with scorn for human laws; where conscience [threw] only a doubtful light upon human actions; where nothing any longer [seemed] either forbidden, or permitted, or honest, or shameful, or true, or false…"[145] Simply put, the Revolution did to France what the phenomenon of civil war, according to Thucydides, did to "all of Hellas" during the Peloponnesian War.[146]

Consequently, in experiencing a democratic revolution the French (unlike the Americans) experienced an existential or "spiritual crisis"—to borrow a concept from the political theorist Tom Darby—of the kind that the Romans experienced after the sack of their "Eternal City." As Darby defines it, a spiritual crisis is about "purpose." It is…

> …about an acute disjunction between that which most concerns us and the common or overarching metaphors we embrace to find something common in the manifold of this varied and dense experience. Crisis then occurs when our shared or *overarching metaphor* becomes uprooted from our shared *underlying concerns*—when, as we might say figuratively, the sky above us no longer connects to the earth below us.[147]

The Revolution and its aftermath resulted in precisely this kind of acute disjunction. As Tocqueville explains, it "took place in the material aspect of society without happening in

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[144] Tocqueville, 22.
[145] Tocqueville, 26.
[146] Thucydides, *The War of The Peloponnesians and The Athenians*, trans. Jeremy Mynott (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 212.
[147] Tom Darby, "On Spiritual Crisis, Globalization, and Planetary Rule," in *Faith, Reason, and Political Life Today*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler and Dale McConkey (Lexington Books, 2001), 33. See also Tom Darby, "On Odysseys Ancient and Modern: An Excursus on Spiritual Crisis and Causal Explanation" in *Sojourn's in the Western Twilight: Essays in Honor of Tom Darby*, ed. Janice Freamo and Robert Sibley (Fermentation Press, 2016), 293-294.

the laws, ideas, habits and mores, the change that would have been necessary to make [it] useful."[148] In effect, the overarching metaphors of the French—those unquestioned "self-evident truths" or axiomatic principles undergirding their moral and political beliefs, their "mores," as a people—no longer connected to that which most concerned them, namely, the moral and political chaos in which they found themselves. No wonder Tocqueville begins *Democracy in America* by telling us that "the entire book that you are about to read has been written under the impression of a sort of *religious terror*…"; no wonder he concludes Chapter 1 of the *Ancient Regime and the Revolution* by comparing the "*religious terror*" of writers during this period to that experienced by Salvianus "at the sight of the barbarians" (more on this in Chapter 5).[149]

In addition to defending the Revolution, then, French historians during this era were also motivated by a more profound and perhaps all too human desire to find *meaning* in what happened. They wanted to know the *significance* of the Revolution and what it meant not only for France, but for the whole of Europe and even for mankind moving forward. "History at first seemed meaningless, valueless, but by virtue of the historian's labour it was revealed to be rational and intelligible; its purposeful movement testified to the operation of laws akin to the laws of nature."[150] The Restoration Liberals firmly believed this. As much as they sought to cloak their political opinions in guise of facts, they sought also to identify in history "some transcendent purpose *beyond* the actual facts."[151]

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[148] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 18.
[149] Tocqueville, 14 (emphasis mine).
[150] Crossley, *French Historians and Romanticism*, 43.
[151] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 5 (emphasis mine).

In fact, so too did one of their chief conservative rivals. In his *Considérations sur la France*, Joseph de Maistre also argued that the Revolution was inevitable or necessitated (ie. beyond the control of man)—and not just, it seems, for political reasons. A devout Catholic and counter-revolutionary, de Maistre believed that the Revolution was God's way of punishing France for failing to fulfil her divine "mission" as a Christian nation.[152] He thought that it was the just dessert of a people who had lost their way and that because it ultimately resulted in the Restoration, its violent character was entirely justified (that it was *corrective* as opposed *retributive* nature). It is true that by casting the Revolution as a divine punishment, de Maistre could better defend the political legitimacy of a restored monarchy—just as the Restoration Liberals, in casting the Revolution as "inevitable," could better defend the latter's heritage. That he did, however, was not simply because he thought it a convenient rhetorical tactic. He too, it seems, was genuinely trying to make sense of what happened; he too, it seems, was trying to identify "some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts." For as he at one point argues, while the phrase "'I do not understand it at all'" is a "fashionable one," uttering it is "sensible" only insofar as doing so connotes a recognition, on the part of the one uttering it, that Providence is the "first cause" of the "great spectacle" now before men's eyes. If by uttering this phrase, however, one "expresses only vexation or sterile despondency," then uttering it amounts to sheer "stupidity."[153]

[152] Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, ed. and trans. Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9.
[153] Maistre, 4.

Thus, while de Maistre disagreed with Mignet politically, he did not so much disagree with Mignet's method or motives as a historian. In order to provide a coherent account of historical change—in order to make the Revolution and its aftermath appear *less than absurd*—he too succumbed to the temptation to focus almost exclusively on general causes, create a historical system and finally, appeal to the existence of "superior force" which as he presents it, is wholly responsible for the movement of history. He too succumbed to the temptation to eliminate the phenomenon of accident from human affairs, altogether.[154] The only difference is that whereas Mignet did so by appealing to the existence of a superior force that appears to be profane (what he calls "the necessity of things"), de Maistre did so by appealing to the existence of a superior force that is in no uncertain terms is sacred (Providence).[155]

And so, while Mellon is not wrong to highlight their political motives, it remains of fundamental importance to recognize that the democratic historians to whom Tocqueville is referring in *Democracy in America* were as much engaged in a search for meaning in the world as they were in a partisan struggle. "The hope of 1789–was followed by division, civil war, the Terror, the despotism of Napoleon and finally defeat at Waterloo. The old centers of spiritual, political and moral authority were destroyed but

[154] Carolina Armenteros, *The French Idea of History: Joseph de Maistre and His Heirs, 1794–1854* (Cornell University Press, 2011), 218. "Maistrian Providence," writes Armentos, "is not only the terrifying source of merited retribution. It is also the organizing principle of accidents, the force lends to phenomena a regularity at once unforeseen and discernable. Most particularly, as the vehicle of a divine will deeply concerned with human beings, Maistrian Providence administers those accidents that relate directly to human fate, human institutions, and human states of mind, rather than to material or physical phenomena. Historical events demonstrate this."

[155] I say "at least appears to be overtly profane" because, as we shall see below, the idea of necessity as it relates to history is a religious idea, not a rational one.

no stable new order emerged."[156] In addition to facilitating a kind of covert defense of the Revolution, therefore, making sense of the past held out the promise of being able to provide both oneself and one's readers with a sense of direction moving forward—with a kind of much needed *hope* regarding the future, as well. It held out the promise, in other words, of being able to play the role of a kind of secular "prophet" in the midst of political and moral turmoil and, as we shall see next, an intellectual climate largely characterized by unbelief.

## DEMOCRATIC HISTORIANS AS SECULAR PROPHETS: AUGUSTIN THIERRY AND FRANÇOIS GUIZOT

In the case of American Revolution, observes Tocqueville, "religion set its own limits." Because the "religious order" in the United States had remained "entirely distinct from the political order," the Americans, he writes, were able to "change ancient laws easily without shaking ancient beliefs."[157] Or to put it differently, because the church had always remained separate from the state, the Americans were able to embrace democracy without having to attack Christianity. In the case of the French Revolution, however, religion did not—because it could not—set its own limits. Because the ancient laws in France had remained inextricably connected to ancient beliefs—because in France, the state had never been separated from the church—to change the former necessarily required shaking the latter.

[156] Crossley, *French Historians and Romanticism,* 2–3.
[157] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 707.

And shake the French did. As Tocqueville explains in the *Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, the French revolution is actually unique in that during this period something "totally unprecedented occurred."[158] Normally, he explains, "established religions" are attacked because the "ardor directed against them" stems from "the zeal inspired by some new religion"—like when Christianity offered itself as a replacement to the "detestable religions of Antiquity."[159] However, in the case of the French Revolution, there simply *was* no "new religion;" *nothing* offered itself as a replacement for Christianity. According to Tocqueville, instead "Absolute disbelief—a state contrary to man's natural instincts and most painful to the soul—somehow appealed to the multitude."[160] Whereas "Christianity retained a great dominion over the mind of the Americans," it therefore retained *none* over that of French. Contrary to the Americans, it seems the French not only attacked Christianity, but attacked it as an end in itself.

And yet, despite their best efforts something *did* apparently retain great dominion over the French—something that according to Tocqueville, retains dominion over human beings in general. In Part 2, Volume 2 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville explains why material goods alone will never the satisfy man's most profound spiritual longings. Despite just how materialistic the United States is, he writes, "religious madness is very common there" and this, he believes, "must not surprise us." "Man has not given himself the taste for the infinite and the love of what is immortal," he explains. "These sublime instincts do not arise from a caprice of the will; *they have their unchanging foundation in*

[158] Tocqueville, *The Ancient Regime and the Revolution*, 137.
[159] Tocqueville, 137.
[160] Tocqueville, 137.

*his nature*; they exist despite his efforts. He can hinder and deform them, but not destroy them."[161] Accordingly, although absolute disbelief somehow appealed to the multitude, the multitude did not—because it *could not*—embrace such disbelief wholeheartedly. Man's natural taste for the infinite and love of what is immortal simply would not allow for it.[162]

Rather than become a nation composed entirely of strong, rational, unbelievers, then, France became a nation composed instead of spiritually starved, weak individuals in search of solid ground. In other words, it became a nation of wanderers searching for something, anything, to fill a spiritual vacuum of its own making. As D. G. Charlton explains:

> …vast synthetic systems of any kind were sure of a ready hearing in France during the half-century and more of social upheaval and intellectual confusion that followed the Revolution and the advent of industrialization. Sensitive to the disruptions of economic, political, scientific, and industrial chance—almost obsessed, indeed, by the dangers of historical development—thinkers sought above all to reconstruct—and to reconstruct, first and foremost, philosophically, religiously.[163]

According to Charlton, the essential background for understanding just why this occurred is "the decline of Christian belief;" for according to him, the construction of these vast synthetic systems was "undertaken, in considerable measure, in order to replace the Christian religion—a religion believed untrue, or incomplete, or maleficent, and yet thought of as the prototype of something greatly valuable in human life, whether social, moral, or psychological, or other reasons."[164] The goal for thinkers of "every shade of

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[161] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 940 (emphasis mine).
[162] In the great debate over where, exactly, Tocqueville stands on the question of "human nature," I therefore side with those who reject the "historical" interpretation—an interpretation which holds that for Tocqueville there is no such thing as a fixed "human nature" (more on this in Chapter 3).
[163] Donald Geoffrey Charlton, *Secular Religions in France, 1815-1870* (Oxford University Press, 1963), 1.
[164] Charlton, 2.

opinion, from extreme Left to equally Extreme Right," was to therefore provide "the new society with an ideological synthesis…"—to return to what had been lost if only by replacing it with something altogether new:

> …It may be the great *summum* of Catholicism, presented afresh by the traditionalists—Bonald, Joseph de Maistre, the younger Lamennais, Chateaubriand. It may be the vast metaphysical structures of Hegel and his fellow idealists in Germany, quickly made known in France by Cousin and his eclectic disciples—who themselves devised a spiritualistic 'natural religion' drawn in part from Hegel and in part from that equally all-embracing metaphysician, Spinoza. It may be the 'positive philosophy' of August Comte, whose principal works alone extend in the commonest editions to some eleven lengthy volumes. It may be the 'religions' of humanity, of Nature, of science, or of progress of other social thinkers—such as Saint-Simon and Enfrain, whose joint oeuvres in the definitive edition amount to forty-seven volumes in all…All these thinkers expound in detail and at length a philosophy to end all philosophies; all soar—in this resembling the Romantic poets—to a messianic oratory, a tone of prophetic revelation; all are persuaded that the fate of a nation can be swayed by ideological truth and error.[165]

Simply put, in varying degrees many thinkers took on the role, whether wittingly or unwittingly, of replacing the dogmas of Christianity with the dogmas of speculative philosophy, and thus of replacing Christian revelation with a kind of revelation of their own.

This was especially true of many (albeit not all) of the democratic historians to whom Tocqueville is referring in *Democracy in America*. Consider first the example of Augustin Thierry—one of the other French historians who, along with Mignet, is identified by Engels in his 1894 letter. Originally, Thierry was a follower and friend of the famous Henri de Saint-Simon, intellectual godfather of a group of socialists commonly called "the Saint-Simonians."[166] According to J.B. Bury, Saint Simon was "one of the liberal nobles who had imbibed the ideas of the Voltarian age and

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[165] Charlton, 2.

[166] Robert B. Carlisle, *The Proffered Crown: Saint-Simonianism and the Doctrine of Hope* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 13. According to Carlisle, Thierry was at one-point described as Saint-Simon's "fils adoptif" [adopted son] on the "frontispiece" of the work L'industrie.

sympathized with the spirit of the Revolution."[167] His "chief masters were always Condorcet and the physiologists [Turgot] from whom he derived his two guiding ideas that ethics and politics depend ultimately on physics and that history is progress."[168] But whereas Condorcet had merely suggested that "the value of history lies in affording data for seeing the future," Bury writes that Saint Simon "raised this suggestion to a dogma."[169] He claimed to have "educed" from history a law that according to Bury essentially holds the following:

> …epochs of organization or construction, and epochs of criticism or revolution succeed each other alternately. The medieval period was a time of organization, and was followed by a critical revolutionary period, which has not come to an end and must be succeeded by another epoch of organization.[170]

As we have seen, Mignet posits something similar; he separates the period from 1789 to 1815 into destructive" and "constructive" phases thereby also suggesting that historical change followed some kind of predictable pattern or "law." But whereas Mignet does so merely to subordinate the past to the present—to render the present the necessary or inevitable outcome of a cacophony of otherwise unintelligible past events—Saint Simon did so in order to predict the future, as well. By invoking this law, he not only subordinated the past to the present, but also claimed that a new "physicist religion" would inevitably "supersede Christianity and Deism," and that "men of science" would inevitably "play the role of organizers which the clergy played in the Middle Ages."[171]

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[167] J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1987), 282.
[168] Bury, 282.
[169] Bury, 284.
[170] Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 284.
[171] Bury, 284.

For his part, Thierry eventually parted ways with Saint-Simon, whose proto-positivist/proto-socialist (which is not to say Marxist) understanding of history another "democratic historian," August Comte, developed even further.[172] But before he did so, he co-published a pamphlet with Saint Simon titled *De la réorganization de la société européenne* that concludes by asserting the following:

> There will no doubt come a time when all the peoples of Europe will feel a need to regulate their general interests, before addressing their national ones; then their ills will begin to decrease, their troubles subside, their wars cease; it's there where we without cessation tend; it's there where the course of the human spirit will carry us…
>
> The imaginations of poets have placed the golden age in the cradle of the human species, amidst the ignorance and coarseness of the earliest times; it was rather the iron age that should have been bequeathed to those times. The golden age of the human race is not behind us, it is before us, in the perfection of the social order: our fathers have not seen it, our children will arrive there one day...[173]

Noteworthy here is the focus of Thierry's and Saint-Simon's attack on the imaginations of poets. It is not that the poets are wrong to imagine a "golden age;" it is not even that the poets are wrong to "imagine." No, the poets are wrong only insofar as what they imagine *exists in the past*. In other words, they are wrong only insofar as they understand or interpret the past as something "better" than the future—as confirmation of the fact that Jean Jacques Rousseau was on to something when he argued, in *The Second Discourse*, that the perfectibility of man is "perhaps the source" of all his "misfortunes."[174] From the perspective of Thierry and Saint-Simon, however, Rousseau was not so much on to something as he was simply wrong: the past does not so much

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[172] Frank Edward Manuel, *The New World of Henri Saint-Simon* (Harvard University Press, 1956), 2–3.
[173] Henri comte de Saint-Simon and Augustin Thierry, *De la réorganisation de la société européenne; ou, De la nécessité et des moyens de rassembler les peuples de l'Europe en un seul corps politique, en conservant a chacun son indépendance nationale* (Adrien Égran, 1814), 111–12. Translations are my own. Apparently, this work was an "adaptation of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's plan for universal peace." See Frank E. Manuel, *The Prophets of Paris* (Harvard University Press, 1962), 111.
[174] Rousseau, *The Second Discourse*, 72–73.

represent a golden age as it does an iron age. The real golden age lies in the future. It lies in the realization of a "perfect social order" that has yet to be seen but that "our children" *will arrive at* one day. Perfectibility, it turns out, is the engine behind mankind's moral and political progress—not his regress. The movement of history confirms as much.

For Thierry, therefore, writing history was about more than simply "selling" the Revolution. He certainly understood that its legacy was at stake and he certainly understood that by writing history, he could defend it. In his *Lettres sur l'histoire de France*, he explicitly admits this.[175] However, as Crossley observes, "The need to confront recent events, to ascribe meaning to them, was *as much* the starting point of [his] historical reflection as was the overt critique of royalist historiography."[176] As a liberal, Thierry was "obviously…not going to defend a nostalgic theory of organicist order; he recognized that conflict and insurrection had driven the process of historical change." However, as a human being in search of solid ground, he also sincerely "believed that events unfolded in accordance with an *underlying purpose* which invested them with meaning. Historical laws existed. The disintegration of the old social order was the inevitable result of the movement of French history."[177]

That Thierry went on to argue that "the continued elevation of the Third Estate" is "the predominant fact" and "the law" of French history, and that "this law of Providence

[175] Mellon, *The Political Uses of History*, 5. As Mellon quotes him, "In 1817, preoccupied with a strong desire to contribute to the triumph of constitutional opinions, I began to look into the works of history for proofs and arguments which would support my political beliefs."
[176] Crossley, *French Historians and Romanticism*, 53.
[177] Crossley, 53 (emphasis mine).

has been accomplished more than once without the knowledge of those who were the agents of it," is therefore hardly surprising.[178] "In this way," he writes,

> …the Third Estate advanced, from the time of its accession to a share of power, up to the concluding years of the eighteenth century; then came a day when it might be said that it was nothing in the political state; and on the morrow of that day, its representatives in the States-General, declaring themselves invested with the national sovereignty, abolished the system of the orders, and founded in France social unity, civil equality, and constitutional liberty.[179]

Shortly before the outbreak of the Revolution, a French priest named Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès wrote a pamphlet titled *Qu'est-ce que le tiers-état?* in which he argued that while the third estate is "everything," it has hitherto in the political order been treated as "nothing."[180] It is to this pamphlet that Thierry is referring but in the context of a much larger argument about the nature of French history as a whole. French history, he thought, was the function of some kind of binding providential law that necessitated the gradual ascension to power over time of the Third Estate and, as a result, the establishment of "social unity, civil equality, and constitutional liberty" throughout France. Proof of this lay especially in the "fusion of the races," which he thought foreshadowed an eventual fusion of "the classes." Historical change was therefore not at all a function of chance; it was product of a "superior force:" a law of divine Providence.

Finally, consider the example of François Guizot—the third and final historian grouped together with Mignet in Engels' 1894 letter, and whose lectures on the history of civilization in Europe Tocqueville himself attended (something that we shall we return to in Chapter 4). Like Thierry, Guizot also understood that writing history was a political

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[178] Augustin Thierry, *The Formation and Progress of the Tiers État or Third Estate in France*, trans. Francis B. Wells (H. G. Bohn, 1859), 214.
[179] Thierry, 214–15.
[180] Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers état?* (Éditions du Boucher, 2002), 1. Translations are my own.

act. Early in his academic career, he became actively engaged in French politics and joined a group of liberal intellectuals commonly referred to as the "Doctrinaires." Political moderates, the Doctrinaires sought to carve out a middle path between ultra-royalist reactionaries (like Joseph de Maistre) and ultra-progressive radicals (like the Saint-Simonians). However, given the intense partisanship of French politics, the Doctrinaires' were less than successful. In keeping with the logic of what Tocqueville describes as "great party" politics, they were not so much applauded for their moderation as they were condemned for their apparent lack of conviction—something that made them the target of both reactionaries and radicals alike.[181] Rather than stay in politics, therefore, Guizot returned to writing and teaching history which he proceeded to use as a vehicle for "attacking the ultra-royalist government." As in the case of Thierry, he advanced the argument that history was not simply a function of chance but of a superior force (again, "Providence") which guaranteed the "progress of civilization."

Even so, as for Thierry writing history for Guizot was more than just a partisan exercise—a "convenient" way to defend his politics. He too, it seems, was motivated by a more profound desire to find meaning in what had happened (discover the future by interpreting the past). In his *Histoire de la Civilisation en Europe,* the published version of his lectures on civilization, he begins by arguing that civilization is a "fact" about which we may ask "a great number of questions." "We may ask," he writes,

> …whether it is a good or an evil? Some bitterly deplore it; others rejoice at it. We may ask, whether it is an universal fact, whether there is an universal civilization of the human

[181] Aurelian Crăiuțu, *Liberalism Under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lexington Books, 2003), 291–92; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 280. As Tocqueville observes, "There are periods of time when nations feel tormented by such great ills that the idea of a total change in their political constitution occurs to their mind. There are other periods when the malaise is even more profound and when the social state itself is compromised. That is the time of great revolutions and great parties."

> species, a destiny of humanity; whether the nations have handed down from age to age, something which has never been lost, which must increase, from a larger and larger mass, and thus pass on to the end of time?[182]

Yet for Guizot, these questions are more rhetorical than they are serious because as he proceeds to tell us, he is already convinced of their answers. "For my part," he writes, "I am *convinced* that there is, in reality, a general destiny of humanity, a transmission of the aggregate of civilization; and, consequently, an universal history of civilization to be written."[183] To be sure, Guizot himself does not, neither in this work nor elsewhere, undertake to write this universal history. But he does undertake to provide a "rational account" of the following essentially theological belief: that "European civilization has entered, if we may so speak, into the eternal truth, into the plan of Providence; it progresses according to the intentions of God" (more on this below). [184] As for Thierry, then, understanding the past for Guizot was also "part of a broader quest for meaning and rationality."[185] It was not just a political project; it was also a sort of spiritual exercise—an attempt to discern and make intelligible the intentions of God in time (history). Consequently, while he was no doubt interested in the past, recounting it served a dual purpose. On the one hand, it served as a convenient means to attack the ultra-royalist government. On the other hand, it enabled him to address the spiritual woes of a nation left wandering. It allowed to him to look "forward to the future," as well.[186]

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[182] Francois Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, ed. Larry Siedentop, trans. William Hazlitt (Liberty Fund Inc., 2013), 13.
[183] Guizot, 13 (emphasis mine).
[184] Guizot, 35.
[185] Crossley, *French Historians and Romanticism*, 72.
[186] Crossley, 88.

It is ultimately for this reason, then, that both Guizot and Thierry (along with many other French historians that can rightly be called "democratic") are sometimes characterized as secular "prophets." In a book length study on French romanticism under the July Monarchy, Paul Bénichou argues that this period of French history might as well as be called "Le temps des prophètes" [The Era of Prophets], in that it was "dominated by the promotion of literature" to the "rank" of prophecy. During this period, he explains, "systems were created to account for the upheavals of modern France and to draw a formula for the future."[187] And among them were the historical ones to which Tocqueville, as we have seen, is anonymously referring in his chapter on historians in democratic centuries. "Augustin Thierry," writes Bénichou, "explained the history of France and the Revolution" by highlighting the determining role of racial conflict—by focusing on "the nature of the races," just as historians in democratic centuries, according to Tocqueville, are sometimes wont to do. Class conflict between the third estate and the aristocracy, he thought, was ultimately the product of racial conflict between the Gauls and the Franks centuries earlier. The Gauls, he argued, were "conquered and became the third estate" while the Franks, who had conquered them, became the aristocracy.[188] All of this, as we have seen, was due to the "law of Providence" which guaranteed the victory of the third estate over the aristocracy and hence a future whereby social unity and constitutional liberty would reign. Similarly, Guizot "crowned his liberal philosophy with a providential vision of the collective destiny of humanity…"[189] He, too, "sang the hymn

[187] Paul Bénichou, *Le temps des prophètes: Doctrines de l'age romantique* (Gallimard, 1977), 7. Translations are my own.
[188] Bénichou, 505.
[189] Bénichou, 383.

of history."[190] "The progress of civilization," he thought, was "irresistible;" it was for all intents and purposes axiomatic.[191] And so, while Thierry focused on trying to understand the "nature of the races," Guizot focused on trying to understand the "spirit of civilization," just as historians in democratic centuries are *also* sometimes wont to do. He focused on trying to understand what exactly civilization was and where it came from in order to determine where it might be headed.

## THE ORIGINS OF DEMOCRATIC HISTORY: CHRISTIAN WORLD HISTORY

Let us recall that the main reason why democratic historians like Mignet, Thierry, and Guizot tend to write about general causes instead of individuals, tend to create historical systems, and tend to believe that what happens in history is ultimately the function of some "superior force," is that the "equality of conditions" characteristic of democracy has a way of making them naturally inclined to do so. As we have seen, because the equality of conditions obscures the power and influence of individuals, historians in democratic centuries find themselves in a difficult situation. Unlike their aristocratic predecessors, they have to somehow make sense of human affairs in a world where human beings, precisely because of their equality, appear to have little control over them. In their search for causes, therefore, these historians are liable to "tire" and, as Tocqueville all but says, take the lazy way out. Rather than do the painstaking work of trying to bring to light the influence of individuals, they are liable instead to write about things such as the "nature of races," "the physical constitution of a country," or the "spirit

[190] Bénichou, 22.
[191] Bénichou, 24.

of civilization"— "great words" that, as Tocqueville writes in a deleted passage, he "cannot hear said without involuntarily recalling the abhorrence of a vacuum…"[192] Moreover, rather than concede that history is often chaotic and, as such, often unintelligible, these historians tend instead to overcorrect. They connect everything they see into a single coherent whole and finally, posit that this whole is governed by a superior force.

Important to recognize, however, is that although Tocqueville attributes these tendencies to the influence of the "equality of conditions," the equality of conditions characteristic of democracy is but an intermediate variable (a secondary cause) in a much longer chain of causation that, at least as Tocqueville presents it, ultimately begins with Christianity. In the Introduction to *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville explains how upon visiting America, nothing struck him "more vividly" than the "equality of conditions." This "primary fact," he explains, exercises a "prodigious influence" in all aspects of American life. Not only does it give "a certain direction to the public mind" and a certain "turn to the laws," but also "creates opinions, gives birth to sentiments, suggests customs and modifies all that it does not produce."[193] Even so, as primary a fact as the equality of conditions is, facts (let us also recall) are not so much causes as they are *effects*. They are the result or the outcome of some prior fact, set of facts, cause, or combination of causes and prior facts. And according to Tocqueville, the equality of conditions is no different. This primary fact, it turns out, grew out of a 700-year development that begins with "the Church" whose "clergy," he explains, applied "within

[192] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 855.
[193] Tocqueville, 4.

its bosom the principle of Christian equality."[194] In other words, this primary fact finds its origins in the primary *cause* of Christianity: a religion that because it "has made all men equal before God, will not be loath to see all citizens equal before the law."[195] Just as it is therefore important to keep in mind that this primary fact is a function, essentially, of Christianity, so too is it important to keep in mind that the methodological tendencies of democratic historians is an indirect by-product of Christianity, as well.[196]

Christianity, it is generally agreed, fundamentally transformed how time (history) came to be both perceived and understood.[197] Prior to the advent of Christianity, the prevailing view (which is not to say the *only* view) was that time was both cyclical and indefinite. It was defined according to an "eternal recurrence" whereby that which came into being (whether it be a plant, a person, or an empire) would at some point fall out of being, only to come into being once again.[198] Moreover, time was largely understood as

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[194] Tocqueville, 6-10.

[195] Tocqueville, 24. For a more detailed analysis of the Christian origins of the equality of condition characteristic of democracy, see Catherine Zuckert, "Tocqueville's New Political Science" in *Tocqueville's Voyages: The Evolution of His Ideas and Their Journey Beyond His Time*, 145-146.

196 See Robert A. Nisbet*, Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development* (Oxford University Press, 1969), 64. As Nisbet, for instance, observes, "Later philosophers of history would modify the Augustinian vision and, especially after the seventeenth century, secularize it; placing in 'nature,' 'spirit,' 'civilisation,' or 'dialectic' what they took from God whom Augustine had made responsible for the First Principle. The unity of mankind that for Augustine came, and could only come, from the premise of the fatherhood of God would for later philosophers be sufficient unto itself, an inescapable attribute of what they would call civilization or society. As a first cause, God would in time disappear, his place taken by one or other of the secular determinisms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."

[197] See Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 182; Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing*, 41; R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 46–52; Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (Transaction Publishers, 1994), 47; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 2006), 56.

[198] See Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 4; William Galston, *Kant and the Problem of History* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), 66–67; Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 55. "Aristotle," writes Fukuyama, "did not assume the continuity of history. That is, he believed that the cycle of regimes was embedded in a larger natural cycle, whereby cataclysms like floods would periodically eliminate not only existing human societies, but all memory of them as well, forcing men to start the historical process over again from the beginning. In the Greek view history thus is not secular but cyclical." Something similarly,

relating to the particular—that is to say, as pertaining to the life cycle of some specific thing (an individual, a nation, or a war, for instance).[199] Following the advent of Christianity, however, time not only became perceived instead as something linear and finite—that is, as having a "beginning" and an "end"—but also, as relating to the universal. For insofar as all human beings regardless of time or place came to be seen as equal in the eyes of a single Abrahamic Creator God, all human beings regardless of time or place came to be seen as sharing in the same history.[200] As a result, what came to matter in history was not so much the passing nature of any one *being* in particular, but rather the passing nature of *Being* (Creation) itself. No longer conceived as cyclical and eternal in nature, what came to matter instead was the "interim" between God's creation of the world, on the one hand, and the end of that world—the second coming of Christ—on the other.[201]

Consequently, Christianity fundamentally transformed how history came to be both synthesized and written. Prior to the advent of Christianity, history was viewed as unsystematic and devoid of meaning or purpose—of any "transcendent purpose beyond the facts." There was no unifying "thread" connecting otherwise disparate events together

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however, can be said of Thucydides. History for him consists in the oscillation between periods of motion [kinesis] and rest, the latter giving rise to former and vice versa.

[199] Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 31. History had been for the Greeks, observes Collingwood, "essentially the history of one particular social unit at one particular time."

200 Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 162. As Löwith puts it, "Simultaneously with the world, time was [from the Christian perspective] created; for it is impossible to imagine a time 'before' the creation of something which moves and changes, while God is changeless and timeless…If, therefore, pagan philosophers hold that the world with its ever recurrent motion is eternal, without beginning and end, they are strangely deceived, not so much by the lack of intelligence as by the 'madness of impiety.' See also Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 61–62; Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 49; Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 56.

[201] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 182; J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress,* 22. "The history of the earth," writes Bury, "was recognized as a unique phenomenon in time; it would never occur again, or anything resembling it."

into a coherent whole across linear time, much less a "superior force" dominating the entire human race. In writing history, not only did historians focus on writing about the determining role of individuals in shaping history, but also, on recounting the past—on the "things that have happened" as opposed to "the things that may happen;" on "facts" as opposed to imagined causes.[202] Following the advent of Christianity, however, history became both systematic and meaningful—that is to say, understood in terms of a teleological process in which divine providence rather than individuals was considered to be the chief participant and architect. Thus, just as historians ceased to focus on the determining role of individuals in shaping history, so they ceased to focus exclusively on recounting the past.[203] What came to matter instead was the human race as a whole and the question, more specifically, of its *future* salvation.[204] History became, from the perspective of Aristotle, more poetic and hence more *philosophical* than political in nature.[205]

As alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, this transformation occurred largely as a result of Saint Augustine, whose *City of God* practically (although not theoretically) refutes the classical view of time by arguing that all of human history, from its beginning

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[202] Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 40–41. According to Collingwood, one of the hallmarks of Greco-Roman historiography is an inordinate focus on individuals. "The ultimate development of this tendency," he writes, "is to find the cause of all historical events in the personality, whether individual or corporate, of human agents. The philosophical idea underlying it is the idea of the human will as freely choosing its own ends and limited in the success it achieves in their pursuit only by its own force and by the power of the intellect which apprehends them and works out means to their achievement. This implies that whatever happens in history happens as a direct result of human will; that someone is directly responsible for it, to be praised or blamed according as it is a good thing or a bad."

[203] Collingwood, 48. According to Collingwood, one of the primary effects that the introduction of Christian ideas into European historiography has been to see not only the actions of historical agents, but the existence and nature of those agents themselves, as vehicles of God's purposes…"

[204] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 184–85.

[205] According to Aristotle, that poetry is between "history" and "philosophy" makes it more philosophical than historical. See also Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (University of Chicago Press, 1953), 142.

to its end, is governed exclusively by divine providence.[206] Written after the sacking of Rome in 410AD, the *City of God* was intended "in large part to sustain the faith of Christians and to answer attacks on Christianity by its enemies."[207] Like many of the histories written by France's Restoration Liberals, therefore, it was also written at a time of spiritual crisis and thus served both a political and spiritual purpose. In a way like de Maistre who argued that the Revolution was God's way of punishing France for failing to fulfil her divine "mission," the Romans argued that the sack of their eternal city was a kind of divine punishment for having embraced Christianity. In effect, in a way like the Restoration Liberals who felt it necessary to sell and defend the Revolution against its detractors, Augustine felt it necessary to sell Christianity and defend it "against the pagans"—those who argued for a restoration of Roman religion.

At the same time, however, just as the Restoration Liberals were motivated by a more profound and all too human desire to find meaning in what had happened, so too was Saint Augustine. Although he "personally believed in the survival of the Roman Empire" (in that in provided for a condition of peace, necessary for preaching the Gospel) he also believed that its destruction—like the destruction of any empire in the so-called "city of man"—had a transcendent purpose.[208] In Book 1, Chapter, 1 of the *City of God*, he argues that "divine providence often corrects and destroys the corrupt ways of men by

[206] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 160. As Löwith explains, "Augustine's refutation of the theory of eternal recurrence in the *City of God* could succeed only insofar as it concentrated on the moral deficiency of the pagan theory, refuting it practically but not theoretically." Why? Because to refute it theoretically would require challenging its logic by means of human reason alone ie. not simply by assuming the truth of Christian revelation.
[207] Nisbet, *Social Change and History*, 63.
[208] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 168.

wars, and tests the righteous and praiseworthy by such afflictions of this mortal life..."[209] Consequently, Augustine did not so much consider the destruction of Rome an enigma as he considered it a vindication of the view that history is a "divinely appointed pedagogy."[210] According to him, "the gods of the pagans never laid down a right doctrine of living;" they took "no care of the lives and morals of the cities and people by whom they were worshiped."[211] It was therefore only a matter of time before God intervened to set them aright.

What transpired history for Saint Augustine was neither a function of chance *nor* meaningless, either. At the very beginning of Chapter 1, Book 5 of the *City of God*, he all but says as much. As he explains:

> According to the judgment or opinion of some, things happen by 'chance' when they have no cause, or no cause arising from a rational order, and by 'fate' when they come about not by the will of God or men, but as a result of a necessary sequence. The cause of the greatness of the Roman empire is therefore neither chance nor fate; for it is beyond doubt that human kingdoms are established by divine providence. If anyone attributes them to fate because he uses the term 'fate' to mean the will or power of God, let him keep to this judgment but correct his language.[212]

What is noteworthy about this passage is that it alludes to two pre-Christian views of causality in the world, neither of which comport with Christian cosmology.[213] As presented by Augustine, the first view—commonly called "the Epicurean doctrine of chance"—affords to chance some kind of causal status independent from a "rational order." It argues, in other words, that effects without causes exist, which is an argument

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[209] Saint Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. and ed. by R.W. Dyson (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.
[210] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 170.
[211] Augustine, *City of God*, 56.
[212] Augustine, 184.
[213] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 124. For a detailed discussion on Augustine's confrontation with the Epicurean doctrine of chance and the Stoic doctrine of fate, see Waller Newell, *Tyranny: A New Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 279-284.

that Aristotle, in the *Physics*, ultimately declares an absurdity. It is therefore simply incompatible with Christian cosmology which assumes that what happens in the world is the result of either natural causes, voluntary causes, or the will of God (divine providence).[214] True, the will of God remains unknown to us (ie. beyond human reason). However, as Augustine in no uncertain terms makes it clear, God is "*not Fortune*."[215] Although God gives "earthly kingdoms to both good men and bad," He "does not do this rashly, or as it were at random..."[216] In effect, while the order of events in history is an order "hidden from us," it is an order which is at once "entirely known" and entirely ruled by God.[217] There simply is no such thing as chance outside of the mysterious nature of divine providence.

Alternatively, the second pre-Christian view of causality in the world—otherwise known as "the Stoic doctrine of fate"—holds that events transpire not as a function of chance but rather as the function of a single "active principle" sometimes referred to as God, sometimes Providence, sometimes Nature, sometimes Fate, and sometimes Logos. The question of whether it is compatible with Christian cosmology is therefore more complicated, and Augustine recognizes as much. While he must of necessity reject the Epicurean doctrine of chance, it is not so clear that he must, of necessity, reject the Stoic doctrine of fate. In fact, he even pretends *not to*. In Book 5, Chapter 8 of the *City of God*, he claims that those "who use the name 'fate' to mean not the position of the stars," but

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[214] Augustine, 202. Although Augustine later explains, there really are no "natural causes" because to assert the existence of natural causes would be to affirm the existence of a Nature separate from God's Will. As a result, just as we cannot separate what might otherwise be called "fortuitous" from God's will, we cannot "separate even natural causes from the will of Him Who is Author and Creator of all nature."
[215] Augustine, 184 (emphasis mine).
[216] Augustine, 184.
[217] Augustine, 184-185.

rather, "the whole chain and series of causes according to which everything that happens occurs," are essentially Christians without knowing it.[218] "There is no need to devote great labour and effort to a merely verbal controversy with such persons," he writes. "For they attribute this order and chain of causes to the will and power of the most high God: to the God Who is most excellently and truly believed to know all things before they come to pass, and to leave nothing unordained..."[219] It turns out, therefore, that to make a distinction between the Stoic doctrine of fate and the Christian doctrine of providence is in a sense to make a distinction without a difference. It does not matter that the Stoics understand fate as a function of "Jupiter" while the Christians understand it as a function of divine providence. What the Stoics mean by fate, argues Augustine, is "chiefly the will of the most high God, Whose power stretches irresistibly forth through all things."[220] Thus, while someone who subscribes to this view can "keep to his judgment," he should simply "correct his language." By Jupiter, what the Stoics actually mean is the Christian God.

Still, important to note is that by correcting one's language one would, in effect, be abandoning one's judgement, as well. As a teacher of rhetoric Augustine must have known full well that what he presents is a distinction without a difference—as a petty disagreement over the mere use of a word—is anything but. Obviously, the supreme god of Stoicism—whether it is called Jupiter, Logos, Providence, Nature, or Fate—is *not* equivalent to the supreme God of Judeo-Christianity. Unlike the latter, the former does

[218] Augustine, 197.
[219] Augustine, 188–89.
[220] Augustine, 197.

not stand outside of nature or history. It is not an "interventionary" deity. On the contrary, the Stoic god is material as opposed immaterial, finite as opposed to infinite. Furthermore, the Stoic god did not create *ex nihilo* a world from which man, understood as fallen, can be "saved." Whatever the Stoic god is and whatever its relationship to mankind might be, it simply has no personified form that at the end of history, "will come again to judge the living and the dead."

To conflate the supreme god of Stoicism with divine providence and, by extension, Stoic cosmology with Christian cosmology, is therefore disingenuous to say the least. According to the Stoic doctrine of fate, although determined by an "active principle," what happens in history remains in the grand scheme of things meaningless because, as Susanne Bobzien reminds us, "for the Stoics the course of the world is cyclical," and so "the conception of fate's eternity leads to indefinite repetitions of all states and events."[221] In other words, because the Stoics did not believe in the Judeo-Christian God and hence did not believe in a pedagogical "interim" between God's creation of the world, on the one hand, and the second coming of Christ, on the other, they did not see a reason to speculate about let alone hope for the future. For the Stoics, the future is but the past which, in turn, is but the future. There is no future fundamentally different from the present. That their conception of time remains cyclical and indefinite means, in effect, that what happens in history has no "transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts."

By contrast, what happens in history for Augustine is inherently meaningful

[221] Susanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Clarendon Press, 1998), 49.

because for him as for any orthodox Christian, God is an interventiary deity who, by appearing in the flesh as Jesus Christ, has revealed to us that contrary to what Stoics believed, time is not so much cyclical and indefinite as it is linear and finite. Insofar as the course of the world *is* a pedagogical "interim" between God's creation of the world and the second coming of Christ, there is every reason to hope for the future. One need only read Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians. In accordance with this view, history is not only "ordered" according to some "active principle" (as it is for the Stoics), but an interventionary one who created *ex nihilo* the heavens and the earth and, most importantly, whose Son "will come again to judge the living and the dead." There is no question as to *whether* this will happen, only *when*.[222] Thus, in Christian cosmology what happens in history is not simply fated (as it is for the Stoics) but fated for a *reason*, as one might say. Events *do* have a "transcendent purpose beyond the facts." Whatever their similarities, then, the Stoic doctrine of fate is no more compatible with Christian cosmology than is the Epicurean doctrine of chance.[223]

Of course, none of this is to say that for Augustine, like Tocqueville's democratic historians, human history is predictable—that it follows some kind of intelligible,

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[222] For Paul, the second coming was imminent. In his Second Letter to the Thessalonians he says that "the day of Christ is at hand."

[223] For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Ralph Stob, "Stoicism and Christianity," *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 4. (1935): 217-224. As he points out, "The Hebrew background put definite content into the term God…The Hebrew postulates throughout that God is a person and, furthermore, that He is immaterial." When compared to Stoicism, however, "we find a strong contrast. The ultimate substance there lacks personality and spirituality…The careful reading of Cicero, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus does not bring one face to face with a living, loving, and just personality as does the reading of the Gospels of Paul" (218). See also Newell, *Tyranny: A New Interpretation*, 279-280. As Newell remarks, "Augustine's interpretation is arresting, but it assumes that Cicero shared Augustine's view that the 'order of causes' necessarily implies the foreknowledge of an interventionary supreme deity. Cicero did not see the matter quite in these terms, however, as can be confirmed by examining another of his treatises On Fate."

progressive trajectory discernable by means of human reason alone. On the contrary, for Augustine as for any orthodox Christian, human history remains entirely *unpredictable*: a function of God's will, which remains unknown to us.[224] What it is to say, however, is for Augustine, rather like Tocqueville's democratic historians, history is neither *absurd* nor *tragic* as the Epicurean doctrine of chance and the Stoic doctrine of fate imply, respectively. For whereas by rejecting the Epicurean doctrine of chance Augustine reduces causality in history to a function of either "voluntary causes" or divine providence, by assimilating the Stoic doctrine of fate to the Christian doctrine of providence, he endows history—mankind's sojourn on the planet—with meaning in a way that the Stoic doctrine of fate never does. To put it another way, by attacking these pre-Christian views of causality in human affairs, Augustine in effect replaces both the absurd and tragic view of history characteristic of the ancients with a future oriented *hopeful* one characteristic of the moderns. He establishes not only an "eschatological pattern" on which "every conceivable view of history that can rightly be called 'Christian'" is predicated, but a pattern on which many *modern* interpretations of history, without acknowledging it, remain predicated as well.

## VOLTAIRE'S ATTACK ON ANCIENT AND CHRISTIAN WORLD HISTORY

Near the beginning of Volume 2 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville tells us that it was during the sixteenth century that reformers such as Luther "submitted to the judgments of individual reason some of the dogmas of the ancient faith…" And as he

[224] To understand the difference, see Ernest L. Fortin, "Augustine's 'City of God' and the Modern Historical Consciousness," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (1979): 323-343.

proceeds to tell us, "Bacon in the natural sciences and Descartes in philosophy rejected received formulations, destroyed the empire of tradition, and overthrew the authority of the master" soon after.[225] What he stops short of explicitly articulating but might nevertheless be said to hint at, however, is that what Luther did in the realm of religion, Descartes in the realm of philosophy, and Bacon in the natural sciences, Voltaire accomplished in the realm of history and historical writing. [226] For as he at one point asks: "Who does not see that Luther, Descartes, and Voltaire all employed the same method and differed only as to breadth of applicability they claimed for it?"[227]

In the *Remarques sur l'histoire* and the *Nouvelles considerations sur l'histoire*—both purely historiographical essays—Voltaire attacks the French historian Charles de Rollin, author of a massive thirteen volume history titled *Histoire ancienne des Egyptiens, des Carthaginois, des Assyriens, des Babyloniens, des Medes et des Perses, des Macedoniens, des Grecs.* Important to recognize, however, is by attacking Rollin, Voltaire's purpose is not so much to criticize the *Histoire ancienne* per se, but rather, to enter into a tacit "dialogue with many other contemporary, recent and ancient historians" so that he can attack both ancient *and* Christian world history alike. [228]

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[225] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 702.
[226] See, for instance, Pierre Force, "Voltaire and The Necessity of Modern History," in *Modern Intellectual History*, Vol 6. No. 3 (2009): 457-484; Friedrich Meinecke, *Historicism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook* (Herder and Herder, 1972) 54; and Jacques Le Goff, "l'Histoire nouvelle," in *La nouvelle Histoire*, ed. by Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier, and Jacques Revel (Encyclopedies du savoir modern, 1978), 222. As Meinecke, for instance, explains, "the first and crowning achievement of the Enlightenment in the historical sphere is to be seen in the work of Voltaire. In many respects, it is true, the historical achievements of Hume Robertson and Gibbon may be ranked higher than Voltaire's; but no one occupies such a broad and obvious and above all effective position within the whole development of historical thought."
[227] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 704.
[228] Síofra Pierse, "Voltaire: Polemical Possibilities of History," in *A Companion to Enlightenment Historiography*, ed. Sophie Bourgault and Robert Sparlling (Brill, 2013), 158.

With regard to ancient history, Voltaire makes his reservations clear. He opens the *Remarques* by lamenting the fact that we continue to take ancient history seriously. "Will we never stop deceiving ourselves about the future, the present and the past?" he provocatively begins. That we continue, even in this "enlightened century," to take pleasure in reading the "fables of Herodotus" must mean that man is born to err. [229] Similarly, in the *Nouvelles considerations*, he argues that to write ancient history is to compile "some truths with a thousand lies."[230] It is, again, to traffic in fable as opposed to fact.[231]

As it soon becomes apparent, however, the fables that make up ancient history are neither Voltaire's only nor perhaps even his *primary* concern. To be sure, he considers these fables useless—that is, at least insofar as they do nothing to clarify what truly matters when it comes to interpreting history. According to Voltaire, when it comes to interpreting history, what matters are what Tocqueville calls general causes: the forces of a country before a war and after a war; the wealth of a given nation; a country's birth rate, population, and death rate; the virtues and vices of a given nation; the progress of the arts and manufacturing in one country versus another; and finally, the change in a country's mores and laws over time.[232] But what also irks Voltaire is the fact that, even in this most enlightened century, we continue to take pleasure in reading fables that, as he refers to them in the *Remarques*, "*not even Herodotus himself*" would have taught.[233]

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[229] Voltaire, "Remarques sur l'histoire," in *OEuvres complètes de Voltaire, 1742-1745 (II),* ed. Myrtille Méricam-Bourdet (Oxford University Press, 2008), 155.
[230] Voltaire, "Nouvelles considérations sur l'histoire," in *OEuvres complètes de Voltaire, 1742-1745 (II)*, ed. Myrtille Méricam-Bourdet (Oxford University Press, 2008), 184.
[231] Voltaire, 184.
[232] Voltaire, 179-84.
[233] Voltaire, "Remarques sur l'histoire," 155 (emphasis mine).

What are these fables? Unfortunately, Voltaire does not say—at least not in the *Remarques* or in the *Nouvelles considerations*. Instead, he continues to criticize Rollin, along with a host of other unnamed "historians," for failing to make use of his "reason;" for "transcribing more than examining;" for failing to write "only new and true things," for lacking a "philosophical spirit;" and thus for telling "stories to children" as opposed to "discussing facts with men."[234] However, if we turn to yet another purely historiographic essay by Voltaire, it becomes clear that the unspecified fables to which he refers at the beginning of the *Remarques* are none other than those on which not ancient but *Christian world history* is predicated.

In the *Histoire*, Voltaire divides the "history of events" into two categories: "the sacred and the profane."[235] Immediately after doing so, however, he writes the following: "Sacred history is a progression of divine and miraculous interventions by which it pleased God to lead the Jewish nation in the past, and to guide our faith in the present day. *I will not address this respectable material at all*."[236] And yet, as alluded to above, by attacking Rollin in both the *Remarques* and the *Nouvelles considerations*, he does just this.

In the Introduction to the *Histoire Ancienne*, Rollin also divides history into the "profane" and "sacred." Unlike Voltaire, however, he *does* address the latter—and in an altogether deferential way. Studying history, argues Rollin, serves not only to reveal the causes "of the rise and fall of Empires" and the "manners of different nations," but also

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[234] Voltaire, 155-159.
[235] Voltaire, "Histoire," in *OEuvres complètes de Voltaire, OEuvres alphabétiques*, ed. Jeroom Vercruysse, vol. 33 (Oxford University Press, 1987), 164.
[236] Voltaire, 164 (emphasis mine).

or, in so doing, to demonstrate something of "infinitely greater importance:" "the greatness of the Almighty, his power, his justice, and above all, the admirable wisdom with which his providence governs the universe."[237] Studying history, in other words, serves not only explain the past, but in so doing, demonstrate the truth of what all three of the Bible, Augustine's *City of God*, and most recently, Jacques Benigne Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, already posit: that "God reigns over every nation" and that, as a result, there is no such thing as "coincidence and fortune" in human affairs.[238]

A French bishop during the counter-reformation, Bossuet found himself in a political situation not unlike that of Augustine, immediately following the sack of Rome. The Romans had long been defeated, but Christianity was yet again under attack—and by two main groups. On the one hand, it was under attack by a group of "Deist, Pantheist, and Atheist" intellectuals known collectively as the "Libertins;" on the other hand, by a "growing school of Biblical critics who had brought into question the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch," including Spinoza.[239] Christianity was under attack, in other words, by the very revolution that as noted above, began in the sixteenth century and culminated in the eighteenth—that began with Luther and ended with Voltaire. Like Augustine, therefore, Bossuet felt compelled to defend Christianity and he did so in a strikingly similar way. He wrote a universal history intended to at once combat what he considered to be the pernicious influence Christianity's detractors *and* shore up the faith of its

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[237] Charles Rollin, *The Antient History of the Egyptians, Carthaginians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes and Persians, Macedonians, and Grecians., vol. 1* (William Duncan, Jr., 1763), i-ii.
[238] Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, *Discourse on Universal History*, trans. Elborg Forster (University of Chicago Press, 1976), 374.
[239] Patrick J. Barry, "Bossuet's 'Discourse on Universal History,'" *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1934), 265-266. See also M.A. Fitzsimons, "The Role of Providence in History," *The Review of Politics,* Vol. 35, No. 3 (1973), 389.

defenders. He wrote an updated version of the *City of God* so as to reaffirm the argument that history was governed by "divine providence" and not by "natural causes" as the Libertins argued.[240]

Consequently, when Voltaire accuses Rollin of failing to use his "reason," of failing to "examine more than transcribe," of lacking a "philosophical spirit," and thus of failing to write "only new and true things," he is not simply referring to Rollin's credulity towards the histories of Herodotus, Plutarch and Livy, among others. He is not simply attacking ancient history. In addition, he is indirectly referring to Rollin's credulity towards Bossuet's *Discours* and thus Christian world history more generally.

In the Introduction to the *Histoire ancienne*, Rollin tells us that although did not "cite the authors" from whom he transcribed while writing it, he made "the best use" he could of the "solid reflections that occur in the second and third parts of the bishop of Meaux's Universal History, which is one of the most beautiful and most useful books in our language."[241] From the perspective of Voltaire, however, "the bishop of Meaux's Universal History," although perhaps beautiful, is clearly useless. For upon reflection, it comes into view as one of those fables that for obvious reasons "not even Herodotus himself" would have taught.

It is on account of both the fables of ancient history *and* Christian world history, then, that Voltaire ends up calling for a revolution in historical writing. "Perhaps soon," he begins the *Nouvelles considerations*, "what has happened in physics will happen in the

[240] Barry, "Bossuet's 'Discourse on Universal History,'" 265.
[241] Rollin, *The Antient History of the Egyptians, Carthaginians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes and Persians, Macedonians, and Grecians*, ii.

way of writing history." In physics, "new discoveries have banned old systems."[242] However, as evidenced by the example of Rollin, such a revolution has yet to occur in the way of writing history. Rollin writes of "iron spiked dolls embracing courtiers" while still others write of "bishops being eaten by rats." What we need, however, is "modern history"—a kind of history "in which we find neither dolls that embrace courtiers, nor bishops eaten by rats."[243] What we need is a kind of history that focuses on identifying general causes and thus will do for the "human race" what modern physics has done for "natural philosophy."[244]

## THE RISE OF DEMOCRATIC HISTORY: FROM THE "DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE" TO THE "DOCTRINE OF PROGRESS"

What Voltaire tacitly suggests by attacking Rollin in both the *Remarques* and *Nouvelles considerations*, respectively, he makes much more explicit in his own universal history, his *Essai sur les moeures et l'espirit des nations*. While writing it, he apparently had Bossuet's *Discours* "constantly in his mind" and in the preface, he tells us that his purpose in the *Essai* is merely to continue what the "illustrious" Bossuet has already begun; to extend Bossuet's *Discours* by picking up precisely where Bossuet leaves off: the epoch of Charlemagne. Yet, as he goes on to explain, in order to effectively do so it will often be "necessary to revisit earlier times"—times that Bossuet already covers.[245] Why? Because as it turns out, what the "illustrious" Bossuet already

[242] Voltaire, 177.
[243] Voltaire, 178–79.
[244] Voltaire, 177.
[245] Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire, 22*, ed. Bruno Bernard et al. (Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

covers is untrustworthy at best and inaccurate at worst. This "eloquent writer," observes Voltaire, writes as if "everything that happens in the world" happens only because of special character of the "Jews." He assumes the that if God gave the Asian empire to the Babylonians, it was to punish the Jews; that if God made Cyrus reign, it was to avenge them; that if God sent the Romans, it was again to punish [them]." "This could be," admits Voltaire—as if to cautiously suggest that he's not entirely closed off to the idea that divine providence is somehow pulling the strings. But as he proceeds to argue, "the grandeur of Cyrus and the Romans has other causes"—causes that the *Libertins*, against Bossuet, point to.[246]

Despite at first presenting the *Essai* as a continuation of Bossuet's *Discours*, therefore, Voltaire quickly reveals that its true purpose is actually to refute the "traditional"—which is to say theological or Christian—"view of history, in principle as well as in method and content."[247] "If you want to consider the globe as a *philosopher* [ie. not a theologian]," he writes, "you first direct your attention to the Orient, the cradle of all the arts, which gave everything to the West." You begin with the Chinese, not the Jews, and you interpret general facts and causes by the standard of reason alone.[248] Finally, you tell the story that "everyone needs to know"—*not* the story that a Bossuet,

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[246] Löwith, *Meaning in History*; Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*, 4–5. Interestingly, Voltaire subtly accuses Bossuet of being too much like the very Libertins he wrote his *Discours* to oppose.
[247] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 105.
[248] Löwith, 106. According to Löwith, "Voltaire's first chapter on China was of fundamental significance, since he wished to challenge the biblical tradition as recorded in the Old Testament." Furthermore, "After having a dealt with the civilized humanity of the Chinese, Voltaire proceeds to deal with India, Persia, and Arabia, and in due time, without Rome and the rise of Christianity. In all these interesting and amusing, but also well-documented, descriptions, he speaks expressly as "philosopher" and "historian," that is, not as a believer in things divine but as who know what is human. Consequently, he separates, time and again, sacred from secular history, which were, for Bossuet, correlated by the unity of a divine purpose. And not only does Voltaire discriminate what we can know by reason from the belief in revelation; but he also attacks the biblical accounts with historical criticism."

much less a Rollin, would have you *believe*. You tell the story of the "development of science and skills, morals and laws, commerce and industry," not the story of "dogmatic religions and wars."[249] You tell the story of progress, not its obstacles.

Interestingly, however, Voltaire's *Essai* is altogether not that different from Bossuet's *Discours.* No, it does not take for granted the "chosenness" of the Jews. No, it does not ignore the more "considerable" nature of the Indians and the Chinese. What it does do, however, is leave intact certain assumptions concerning the nature of time or history that, despite their theological origins, the otherwise irreligious Voltaire takes for granted, nonetheless.

For example, although he attacks the content of Bossuet's *Discourse*, Voltaire never once attacks *its aim* or *purpose*. He never once calls into question its goal: to be historical equivalent of "what a world map is to particular maps."[250] And for good reason: given Voltaire's own aspirations to write a universal history, this is an aim that he *rather like Bossuet* thinks entirely legitimate.[251] Nor, however, does Voltaire ever take explicit issue with Bossuet's understanding of history as something "meaningful." As Brumfitt observes, although he tries to develop an alternative theory of causation to that of Bossuet (one that is decidedly non-theological) "he never attempts to refute directly the idea of Providence."[252] And as Ernst Cassirer argues, he actually "falls prey to that naïve

[249] Voltaire, "Remarques sur l'histoire," 162.
[250] Bossuet, *Discourse on Universal History*, 4.
[251] Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Eighteenth Century and the Historical World," in *idem Hermeneutics and the Study of History* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 348.
[252] John Henry Brumfitt, *Voltaire, Historian* (Oxford University Press, 1958), 32. As Brumfitt later explains, although "on one occasion" Voltaire "seriously suggests the divine control of historical events," his historical determinism is actually much more like that of Mignet than it is of Bossuet. It is a "determinism by fate…" (123).

teleology which as a pure theorist he so strongly rejects and attacks. Just as Bossuet projects his theological ideal into history, so Voltaire projects his philosophical ideal; as the former applies to history the standard of the Bible, so the latter freely applies his rational standards to the past."[253]

While his *Essai* therefore marks the liberation of universal or world history from its theological foundations, it nevertheless remains predicated on several key assumptions regarding the nature of time/history that "*because of our habit of thinking in terms of the Christian tradition…[seem] so entirely natural and self-evident*."[254] It does not simply return to a pre-Christian cyclical understanding of time, and so it neither abandons the eschatological framework on which Christian world history is predicated, nor the "hope for salvation" that thinking in terms of such a framework has a tendency to inspire. As Löwith explains:

> A universal history directed toward one single end and unifying, at least potentially, the whole course of events was not created by Voltaire but by Jewish messianism and Christian eschatology, on the basis of an exclusive monotheism. Once this belief had been adopted generally and had prevailed for centuries, man could discard the doctrine of providence, along with that of creation, judgment, and salvation, but he would not return to such views as had satisfied the ancients. Man will seek to replace providence, but within the established horizon, by secularizing the Christian hope of salvation into an indefinite hope of improvement and faith in God's providence into the belief in man's capacity to provide for his own earthly happiness.[255]

And by telling the story that "everyone needs to know"—not the story that a Rollin or a Bossuet would have you believe—Voltaire's *Essai* does just this. In the *Essai*, "God has

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[253] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koehl and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton University Press, 1951), 221-222.
[254] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 185 (emphasis mine). As Löwith explains, "…the articulation of all historical time into past, present, and future reflects the temporal structure of the history of salvation. The past points to the first things, the future to the last things, and the present to a central presence which connects the past with the future through teleological succession."
[255] Löwith, 111.

retired from the rule of history."[256] But that does not mean that history has all of sudden become meaningless, as one might expect. On the contrary, history remains meaningful and future oriented—just not in the way that Augustine and Bossuet, among other writers of Christian world history, claim. For its meaning lies not so much in the belief that Christ will at some point come again, but in the apparent "fact" that it is moving towards what Tocqueville, in his chapter on the "indefinite perfectibility of man," calls an "ideal and always fleeting perfection:" an "immense grandeur" that man can see only "vaguely at the end of the long course that humanity must still cover" (more on this in Chapter 3).[257] For Voltaire, "The purpose and meaning of history are to improve by our own reason the condition of man, to make him less ignorant, 'better and happier.'"[258] The purpose and meaning of history are found in the idea of progress, not the idea of divine providence.

Consequently, Voltaire's *Essai* paves the way for a secular alternative to Christian world history to emerge. More specifically, it paves the way for a kind of history to emerge that, like Christian world history is, generally speaking, universal in its scope and teleological (meaningful) in its orientation but that, unlike Christian world history, is *philosophical* and *progressive* as opposed to *theological* and *redemptive* in its character. As Löwith explains:

> THE crisis in the history of European consciousness, when providence was replaced by progress, occurred at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. It is marked by the transition from Bossuet's *Discourse on Universal History* (1681), which is the last theology of history on the pattern of Augustine, to Voltaire's

[256] Löwith, 107.
[257] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 761.
[258] Löwith, 107.

> *Essay on the Manners and Mind of Nations* (1756), which is the first "philosophy of history," a term invented by Voltaire. [259]

This is not, of course, to say that Voltaire is Turgot or Condorcet, let alone Saint-Simon. No, as Löwith observes, Voltaire is much "too intelligent" to "overwork the idea of progress."[260] And so, unlike Tocqueville's democratic historians he actually leaves some room for accident or chance in his theory of causation. For him, "regress" remains a distinct—albeit *temporary*—possibility. Even so, because he is the first to secularize a kind of history that, prior to the publication of his *Essai*, had always remained overtly theological, he sets the stage for historians like Turgot, Condorcet, and Saint-Simon (and following them, historians like Mignet, Thierry, and Guizot) to complete an important transition—the transition from Christian world history to democratic history—which his *Essai* initiates. Indeed, that "all three" of Turgot, Condorcet, and Saint Simon can be understood as "working out the decisive transformation of the theology of history into a philosophy of history as inaugurated by Voltaire," means in effect that all three can be understood as working out the decisive transformation of Christian world history into what Tocqueville understands as history in democratic times.[261]

As Bury observes, "so long as the doctrine of Providence was indisputably in the ascendant, a doctrine of Progress could not arise."[262] From a purely philosophical perspective, the two are simply incompatible. Concerning the doctrine of providence, it holds (as we have seen) that history is the function, ultimately, of God's will—an omnipotent superior force whose intentions remain shrouded in mystery (beyond our

[259] Löwith, 104.
[260] Löwith, 111.
[261] Löwith, 92.
[262] Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 21.

comprehension as fallen beings). Alternatively, the doctrine of progress it holds that history is the function of certain ineluctable "laws"—laws that, like the laws of nature are presumably discoverable *by means of human reason alone*. Accordingly, the logic on which the former is predicated precludes the logic on which the latter depends and vice versa: if divine providence—whose "secret designs" remain unknown to us—is to exist, then historical laws can hardly be called "ineluctable;" otherwise divine providence simply cannot not be said to govern the world.[263] By contrast, if historical progress exists then it cannot not be at "the mercy of any external will; otherwise, there would be no guarantee of its continuance" and it would simply "lapse into the idea of Providence."[264] Given this incompatibility, French historians like Turgot, Condorcet, and Saint Simon came to realize that as long as the doctrine of providence remained a kind of history that would accomplish for the "human race" what modern physics has done for "natural philosophy," as Voltaire describes it, would remain "rather a dream than a science" as well.[265] They came to realize what Bacon and Descartes had come to realize centuries earlier vis. a vis. the natural sciences and philosophy.

In order to replicate in the realm of history what had already happened in the realm of physics, therefore, democratic historians first had to overcome this difficulty, and did so through two main ways: either they substituted the doctrine of providence for the doctrine of progress outright—that is, replaced the idea of divine providence with the idea of progress—or, alternatively, tacitly collapsed the doctrine of providence *into* the

[263] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 161. As Löwith points out, "The Christian God is inaccessible by natural theology. Since God is superior to his creation in power and being, there can be no genuine explanation of God by the world."
[264] Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 5.
[265] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLVI.11.

doctrine of progress—that is, subordinated the former *to* the latter. Substituting it outright, for instance, was Saint-Simon who, as we have seen, actually thought he had educed a "law" from history that enabled him to predict the future. In his *Introduction aux travaux scientifiques au XIXe siècle*, he completely rejects the theological doctrine of providence by engaging in a sustained attack on Deism. "If Galileo, Bacon, and Descartes affirmed that they were Deists, it was because they did not wish to shock public opinion," he writes, "and did not wish wholly to abandon the old system before completing the organization of a new one." The time, however, has come to do just that; for according to him, God is but man's invention: no more does He "govern the world" than He does "exist" outside of man's imagination. Of course, this is not to say that there is *no* "superior force" governing the world—just that divine providence, which remains unknown to us, is not it. As evidenced by the development over time of the sciences—that is, from their "conjectural" beginnings to their "positive" ends—time (history) is clearly governed by some kind of universally binding, gravitational law akin to the one that, according to Newton, governs space (nature). In other words, history is also governed by a law that is discernible by means of human reason alone.

As for Voltaire, then, history for Saint Simon remains both linear and meaningful, as well. But whereas Voltaire is much too intelligent to overwork the idea of progress, Saint-Simon is much too hopeful to even question it.[266] In the tenth and final stage of his

[266] F. M. H. Markham, *Henri Comte De Saint-Simon: Selected Writings* (Basil Blackwell, 1952), xviii. As Markham puts it, "St. Simon certainly claimed to be a genius, and his intellectual pretensions verged on megalomania."

*Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progres de 1'esprit humain*, Condorcet—one of Saint Simon's "chief masters"—argues that,

> If man can, with almost complete assurance, predict phenomena when he knows their laws, and if, even when he does not, he can still, with great expectation of success, forecast the future on the basis of his experience of the past, why, then, should it be regarded as a fantastic undertaking to sketch, with some pretense to truth, the future destiny of man on the basis of his history? The sole foundation for belief in the natural sciences is this idea, that the general laws directing the phenomena of the universe, known or unknown, are necessary and constant. Why should this principle be any less true for the development of the intellectual and moral faculties of man than for the other operations of nature? Since beliefs founded on past experience of like conditions provide the only rule of conduct for the wisest of men, why should the philosopher be forbidden to base his conjectures on these same foundations, so long as he does not attribute to them a certainty superior to that warranted by the number, the constancy, and the accuracy of his observations?[267]

Here, Condorcet makes what can only be described as an optimistic statement concerning man's capacity to predict his future destiny. Yet, despite its hopeful outlook, it fails to capture the optimism characteristic of his student, Saint Simon.[268] Never mind Condorcet's concluding caveat. Because Saint Simon is convinced that time (history) functions according to a law of progress in the same way that space (nature) functions according to the law of gravity, *he did* attribute to his conjectures a "certainty superior to that warranted by the number, the constancy, and the accuracy of his observations." Put another way, unlike Voltaire he completely replaces the doctrine of providence with a doctrine of progress that *rather like* the doctrine of providence *also* happens to provide for the future salvation of mankind. The only difference is that whereas the doctrine of providence provides for mankind's felicity in another world, the doctrine of progress provides for its felicity in this world.

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[267] Nicholas de Condorcet, *Condorcet: Political Writings*, ed. Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 125–26.
[268] Georg G. Iggers, *The Cult of Authority: The Political Philosophy of the Saint-Simonians* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1958), 11.

Saint Simon's thought—along with that of his disciples (in particular August Comte)—therefore completes a transition that Voltaire's *Essai* only initiates: it transforms Christian world history into the most extreme form of democratic history by revealing precisely what that "immense grandeur" which man can otherwise see only "vaguely at the end of the long course that humanity must still cover," namely, a golden age characterized by the "perfection of social order."[269] In a letter to an unnamed "American" written in 1817, Saint Simon explains that his "intention" (along with that, presumably, of his followers) as a writer is "simply to promote and explain a development which is inevitable." "Our desire," he writes, "is that men should henceforth do consciously, and with better directed and more useful effort, what they have hitherto done unconsciously, slowly, indecisively and too ineffectively."[270] In other words, Saint Simon's desire is simply to bring to the attention of men that, whether they like it or not, they are the agents of a historical process and, given this fact, should get with the proverbial program. Rather than slow down or attempt to stall the inevitable, they should accept and accelerate its coming into being. They should strive to build the very perfect social order that, according to Saint Simon, nevertheless awaits them.

Finally, there are those historians who unlike Saint-Simon, tacitly collapse the doctrine of providence *into* the doctrine of progress—historians like Thierry and Guizot who, as we have seen, employ the language of providence but do so in the service of defending what are fundamentally *progressive* views of history. If we recall, in his *Essai*

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[269] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 67. According to Löwith, "The only great counterpart to Hegel's philosophy of history in comprehensiveness, though not in depth, is Comte's (1798- 1857) Cours de philosophic positive. "Both," he points out, are a "theodicy, explaining and justifying every epoch as a 'necessary' and salutary' phase in the whole course of history."

[270] Markham, *Henri Comte De Saint-Simon: Selected Writings*, 70.

*sur l'histoire de la formation et des progrès du tiers état* Thierry argues that "the continued elevation" of the Third Estate is not only "the predominant fact," but also the *providential law* of French history. "This *law of Providence*," he writes, "has been accomplished more than once without the knowledge of those who were the agents of it."[271] It might therefore seem, at first, like he too subscribes to the theological doctrine of providence. It may indeed appear that like Bossuet he too believes history is the function of an omnipotent "superior force" that works in and through men without their knowing it. But again, history as governed by divine providence is, as pointed out above, fundamentally at *odds* with the idea that history follows ineluctable "laws," whether progressive or otherwise (an idea predicated on the assumption that genuine knowledge of the destiny of mankind in its sojourn on the planet, is possible). Thus, despite using the language of providence, it would be wrong to associate Thierry with Augustine and Bossuet—neither of whom as believing Christians subscribe to the modern idea of progress. For them as for any devout Christian, man is and will remain fallen—*imperfect* as opposed to perfectible—until Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead. This a belief that continues to be professed every Sunday by Catholics across the globe. Thierry, however, does not subscribe to this creed. His belief in the idea of progress trumps his apparent belief in divine providence in that he subordinates the latter's otherwise hidden designs to an observable "predominant fact," which then uses to account for the past, rationalize the present, and speculate about the future. In short, he

[271] Thierry, *The Formation and Progress of the Tiers État*, 214 (emphasis mine).

demystifies providence to a point where there is, strictly speaking, nothing "providential" about it.

And the same can be said of Guizot. As we have seen, like Thierry he too employs the language of "providence." In his *Histoire générale de la civilisation en Europe*, he mentions "providence" no fewer than twelve times. To be sure, some of these mentions no doubt suggest some kind of fundamental agreement, on his part, with the traditional or theological understanding of divine providence. Yet, for the same reason that it would be wrong to associate Thierry with Bossuet and Augustine, it would also be wrong to associate Guizot with them, as well. Like Thierry, Guizot consistently subjects providence to an empirical test and in so doing he also demystifies it. The point of his *History*, he states, is to develop "the facts" and in so doing "*furnish the proof*" necessary to defend the hypothesis (which in his view has a "high degree of probability") that European civilization "*progresses* according to the intentions of God." Yet, to prove as much would from the orthodox perspective amount to proving *too much*; for it would in effect subordinate that which must, of necessity, remain unknown to us (the mind of God) to that which does not (empirical reality). Simply put, it would render faith redundant which is something that Guizot, *unlike Montesquieu and Tocqueville,* in no uncertain terms does (more on this in Chapter 5).[272]

[272] I therefore disagree with Crăiuțu over the status of Guizot's "providentialism." According to him, "It would be more accurate to argue that in Guizot's writings, the ideas of progress and necessity were more an expression of providentialism than determinism." My own view, however, is that upon embracing the idea of progress (something that as we shall see, Tocqueville stops short of doing), one necessarily slips into determinism because the idea of progress, unlike the idea of providence, cannot be defended on the basis of faith alone. It stands or falls on idea that that genuine knowledge vis. a vis. the movement of history is possible and hence that historical "laws" can be said to exist. To embrace the idea of progress, therefore, is necessarily to embrace some form or historical determinism, whether one intends to or not. This is why as Crossley, for instance, observes, "Guizot did at times lend an air of inevitability to his analysis as when,

## HISTORY IN DEMOCRATIC TIMES: "CHRISTIAN BY DERIVATION, ANTI-CHRISTIAN BY CONSEQUENCE"

In composing Volume 2, Part 1, of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville originally planned to include a short chapter titled "Religious Eloquence or Preaching," in which he was going to argue that despite being easier to destroy than to modify, democracy has somehow managed to modify without destroying the "language of the pulpit." The reason is as follows. According to Tocqueville, there is nothing so litt le "variable" by nature as religion and it "cannot" be otherwise. That religion *claims to be true*—that it claims to be something *eternal*—makes it impervious to change in a way that "nothing" else is. Accordingly, in Tocqueville's view, what applies to religion can be said to extend "to everything that is related to religion no matter how distantly, " as well. Just as there is no religion so unimportant that it is not more difficult to change than to destroy, so "there is no religious custom so unimportant that it is not more difficult to change [versus destroy] than the constitution of a people."[273]

And yet, democracy has managed to do precisely that which is more difficult. It has somehow managed to modify religion without giving the lie to its supposed truth and hence modify the language of pulpit without destroying it. As proof, one need only pay attention to the character and content of "religious eloquence and preaching" in democracy vs. in aristocracy. "I enter a church," writes Tocqueville…

> I see the priest mounting the steps of the pulpit. He is young. He wears priestly vestments, but beyond that there is already nothing of the traditional or of the conventional in his bearing, in his gestures, or in his voice. He doesn't say "My brothers," but "Sirs." He doesn't recite, but he improvises. He does not talk about the

like Saint-Simon, he alluded to the general course of events or suggested that despotism, like anarchy, in the end served the cause of progress" (87).

[273] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 859.

> growing pain that our sins cause him; our good works do not fill him with ineffable joy. He engages his listener hand to hand, and armed like him, takes him on. He feels that it is no longer a matter of touching us, but of convincing us. He addresses himself not to faith, but to reason; he doesn't impose belief, he discusses it and wants to have it freely accepted. He does not go to search for arguments in the old arsenal of scholastic theology, in the writings of the Doctors, any more than in the decrees of the Popes and the decisions of the Councils. He borrows his proofs from secular science; he draws his comparisons from everyday things; he bases himself on the most general, the clearest and most elementary truths [v: notions] of human philosophy. He cites the poets and orators of today almost as much as the Fathers of the Church. Rarely does it happen that he speaks Latin, and I cannot prevent myself from suspecting that the Kyrie Eleison of the Mass is all the Greek he knows.[274]

Here, Tocqueville describes democracy's net effect on the religious custom of preaching which, as we can see, was not to so much to destroy but rather drastically change it. Prior to the advent of democracy, preaching was either much less or not at all philosophical. It entailed invoking the authority of church doctrine instead of making arguments, which is also to say that it relied on *ethos* and *pathos*, not *logos*, as means of persuasion. Following the advent of democracy, however, preaching sought to appeal to one's reason more than it did to one's faith, and so it began to "convince" more than simply "touch." A sermon delivered at the pulpit became far less formal and sacred in its character and far more informal and profane in its content. Rather than be destroyed, it *adapted itself*—like Christianity in general—to a world "entirely new."[275]

Now, the reason why Tocqueville did not, in the end, include this chapter in *Democracy in America* is rather simple. As he wrote in the margins of a draft version, "It cannot be applied to America. In America, by exception, religious beliefs are very firm and the language of priests is not a plea in favor of Christianity."[276] In other words, because Americans already believe, including such a chapter would have seemed odd. In

[274] Tocqueville, 859.
[275] Tocqueville, 16.
[276] Tocqueville, 859.

America, the language of priests need only "touch," not "convince." And so, to include a chapter which argues that the language of priests now does the opposite, would make little sense.

As evidenced from the foregoing, however, clearly such a chapter applied to France—that country which according to Tocqueville was constantly in his mind as he wrote *Democracy in America*. Because it actually had a democratic revolution, France, as we have seen, transformed into a country where religious beliefs became infirm at best and non-existent at worst. As a result, it became a nation where the religious custom of preaching, if it was to survive, was essentially *forced* to become a plea in favor of Christianity. Preaching *had* to begin addressing itself to reason, not simply to faith; it *had* to begin discussing belief, not simply imposing it; it *had* to utilize proofs from secular science, not just scholastic theology; and it *had* to incorporate the writings and sayings of today's poets and orators, not just yesterday's Church Fathers. In short, it *had* to secularize itself—that is, at least to a point where Christianity could be made respectable if not great again: compatible with the very cult of reason that tried to replace it.

Preaching in post-revolutionary France therefore underwent a transformation that, as we have seen, Christian world history also underwent in that country. In a footnote to this unpublished chapter—which, incidentally, was to appear immediately following his chapter on historians in democratic centuries—Tocqueville writes that,

> If, back in the solitude of your dwelling, you happen to compare the man whom you have just heard with the great Christian orators of past centuries, you will discover, not without terror, what the strange power that moves the world is able to do; and you will understand that democracy, after remaking in passing all the ephemeral institutions of men, finally reaches the things most immobile by their nature, and that, not able to change the

> substance of Christianity, which is eternal, it at least modifies the language and the form.[277]

Something similar, it might be said, happened to Christian world history. Compare the democratic historians of today with the Christian historians of past centuries, and you too will discover what the strange power that moves the world is able to do. Although secular, the overlap between a Condorcet, Turgot, Saint-Simon, Mignet, Thierry, or Guizot, on the one hand, and a Bossuet or Augustine on the other, is striking. You will also understand that democracy, after remaking in passing all the ephemeral *ideas* of men, finally reaches those most immobile by their nature, and that, rather than change the eschatological substance of Christian world history, has simply modified its form.

Consequently, although it claims to be scientific—philosophical as opposed to theological—democratic history is more a product of hope and faith than meets the eye. As we have seen, albeit in differing ways democratic historians tend, on the whole, to account for social and political change by assuming the existence of some "superior force," whether it be an "inflexible providence" or some other necessity that "envelops the human race and binds it." For only by doing so are they able to make sense of the confused mixture" of "conditions," "sentiments," and "ideas," that confront them. But herein lies the problem. As Nisbet explains, "The idea of necessity as it applies to human history, and above all to the future, is scarcely the product of science as we know it in such disciplines as chemistry and physics. In all truth, the idea of necessity is the product of nothing exclusively rational at all. It is also the child of religion—especially

[277] Tocqueville, 860.

Augustinian Christianity."[278] It does not so much stem from some kind of scientific inference or inductive reasoning as it does conjecture, the root of which an unexamined moral belief in the modern idea of progress, also called the indefinite perfectibility of mankind. Hence that Saint Simon was not a Restoration Liberal and that Mignet, Thierry, and Guizot were not Saint-Simonians does not really matter. What matters is the hopeful and across the board *philanthropic attitude* animating their respective interpretations of history, each of which attributes a transcendental purpose to events or facts by either positing or presupposing the existence of a "superior force" that, like divine providence, removes both the tragedy and absurdity otherwise characteristic of human history. Regardless of its scientific pretense, at its core democratic history remains is theological in nature.

Like the language of democratic priests, then, the histories of democratic historians are essentially what Löwith describes as "Christian by derivation and anti-Christian by consequence." On the one hand, they retain an eschatological substrate that is fundamentally Christian and not scientific—theological as opposed to philosophical—in origin. On the other hand, however, they appeal to one's reason instead of one's faith and utilize secular science as opposed to scholastic theology in order to "convince" and not simply "touch" those who read them. In this way, democratic histories transform the fundamentally Christian idea of salvation—that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead—into the fundamentally anti-Christian idea that a "golden age," an "immense grandeur" that man can see only "vaguely at the end of the long course that

[278] Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 69.

humanity must still cover," approaches. According to Augustinian Christianity, nothing that happens in the city of man is of great consequence. In fact, the only thing that *really* matters is whether one accepts Christ as personal savior and lives according to the standard of God. There is no "progress" in the immanent sense of the term because, as discussed above, the golden age to come is *not of this world*. But for democratic historians of the kind that Tocqueville is concerned with, the city of man is all there is. As a result, in order to locate meaning in what transpires there, these historians bring heaven down to earth by collapsing the city of God into the city of man—that is, by "immanentizing the eschaton."[279] For them, the golden age to come, however vague it may appear, *is* of this world. And as we shall see next, it is precisely for this reason that democratic peoples are liable to find their histories so alluring.

[279] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1952), 120. As Voegelin explains, "The problem of an eidos in history…arises only when Christian transcendental fulfilment becomes immanentized. Such an immanentist hypostasis of the eschaton, however, is a theoretical fallacy. Things are not things, nor do they have essences, by arbitrary declaration. The course of history as a whole is no object of experience; history has no eidos, because the course of history extends into the unknown future."

# Chapter 3: The Allure of Democratic History: Tocqueville on Pantheism and Its Historical Analog

*If in democratic centuries faith in positive religions is often shaky and beliefs in intermediate powers, whatever name you give them, grow dim, men on the other hand are disposed to conceive a much more vast idea of Divinity itself, and the intervention of the divine in human affairs appears to them in a new and greater light. Seeing the human species as a single whole, they easily imagine that the same design rules over its destinies, and in the actions of each individual, they are led to recognize the mark of this general and constant plan by which God leads the species.*[280]

-Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

From the previous chapter, it should be clear that democratic history came onto the historiographical scene in large part because of Voltaire's desire to accomplish in the realm of history and historical writing what Bacon and Descartes had already accomplished in the realms of natural science and philosophy, respectively. As we have seen, because Voltaire attacks both ancient and Christian world history, he plays a singularly important role in the genesis and rise of democratic history. Despite attacking Bossuet, he nevertheless takes over Bossuet's fundamentally theological project by secularizing it in *Essai sur les moeurs*, thus paving the way for democratic history to develop into what it eventually became: a type of history that as Löwith defines it, is "Christian by derivation and anti-Christian by consequence," philosophical and progressive as opposed to theological and redemptive.

And yet, to understand this is in a way to understand only *one side* of the story. The fact is that democratic history would not have risen to such prominence (and as we

[280] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 838.

shall see in Chapter 4, become such a problem worthy of Tocqueville's attention) had it not been for the embrace of its readers: the Christian, democratic peoples or audiences for whom Tocqueville's democratic historians were writing. In Restoration France, "every effort" was apparently made to "provide historical works with the largest possible audience."[281] And as we have seen, this was largely because doing so became the most convenient—that is to say, politically effective—way for the Restoration Liberals to keep the Revolution alive. Important to keep in mind, however, is that to provide historical works with the largest possible audience—whether for strictly political or as I have argued, for more profound, psychological reasons—is not necessarily to *sell* them, just as to provide a contemporary pop song with the largest possible audience—whether for money or for fame—is not necessarily to make it a "hit." For that to happen, there must be a buyer with a need just as there must be a listener with an itch or, what in the case of a particular historical work amounts to a reader with an interest.

Now, in Restoration France there were many such readers because, as discussed in the previous chapter, during the first half the 19th century there was a pervasive desire on the part of the French to fill a spiritual vacuum of their own making. After having destroyed their "ancient beliefs," they found themselves in search of something, anything, that would allow them to not only make sense of the Revolution, but also, to intuit what the Revolution might mean for the future—something that would provide for them direction and meaning in a world turned upside down. Not surprisingly, therefore, democratic histories like Thierry's *Lettres sur l'histoire de France* (1807), Mme de

[281] Stanley Mellon, *The Political Uses of History*, 2.

Staël's *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la révolution française* (1817); Mignet's *Histoire de la révolution française* (1824); and Thiers' *Histoire de la revolution française* (1823-1827) became "best sellers," so to speak. Thiers' *Histoire*, for instance, "benefited from 150,000 buyers," something "prodigious for the time since it was composed of ten volumes," meaning that a total of 1,500,000 volumes were sold.[282]

Yet, as I hope to convey in this chapter, however great the appetite was for democratic history during this period, it would be a mistake to assume that it was due *exclusively* to the moral and political climate of Restoration France. The fact is that this demand, this craving for history—this "historical fever," as Berantes called it—was as much a function of the nature of the *democratic mind* itself as it was of any other contextual factor whether it be French romanticism, the "intellectual sterility" of Napoleon's Empire, or the peculiar nature of French politics—as Mellon, for instance, contends.[283] Yes, many democratic histories were written during the French Restoration and yes, Tocqueville himself personally knew many of the historians who wrote them. He was therefore no doubt careful not to name names. However, just as this kind of history exists *outside* of the context of Restoration France, so does this kind of historian exist *outside* of Tocqueville's immediate social and political orbit.[284] Lest one forget, Tocqueville titles his chapter on democratic historians in *Democracy in America* "On Some Tendencies Peculiar to Historians in *Democratic Centuries*." He does not title it "On Some Tendencies Peculiar to Historians in Restoration France." What he is

[282] René de La Croix duc de Castries, *Monsieur Thiers* (Perrin, 1983), 44.
[283] Mellon, *The Political Uses of History*, 1.
[284] Although Tocqueville was unaware of German contributions to the philosophy of history until 1843, many Restoration Liberals were not. These include, for instance, François Guizot and Victor Cousin, both of whom are essentially responsible for what might be called the "Doctrinaire theory of history."

ultimately discussing in this chapter, then, is a kind of history that wherever and *as long as* the social-state of democracy (a social-state that, like democratic history itself, also finds its roots in Christianity) continues to exist will not only continue to be written but will also continue to be read.

## THE STRANGE PERSISTENCE OF DEMOCRATIC HISTORY

Since the publication of Volume 2 of *Democracy in America*, democratic historians of the kind that Tocqueville describes appear to have vanished—that is, at least officially. According to David Christian, towards the end of the nineteenth century, "professional historians expelled universal history from the discipline."[285] Recognizing just how unscientific it actually was—recognizing for themselves that it was more a product of hope and conjecture than scientific inference—they turned their backs on writing what today is called "master" or "meta-narrative," and opted instead to specialize. This, they thought, was the only way to *actually* make history scientific and thus to *actually* carry out the revolution in historical writing that, as we saw in the previous chapter, Voltaire initially calls for in his *Remarques*. Then, in the twentieth century, professional historians began to doubt the validity of science itself and, as a result, did to democratic history what Voltaire did to ancient and Christian world history, centuries earlier: debunked its presumed authority by exposing its hidden bias. In effect, while at

[285] David Christian, "The Return of Universal History," History and Theory 49, no. 4 (2010): 12. See also Barbara Weinstein, "History Without a Cause? Grand Narratives, World History, and the Postcolonial Dilemma," *International Review of Social History* Vol. 50, No. 1 (2005): 71–93; and Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 69. According to Christian, universal history is "the attempt to understand the past at all possible scales, up to those of cosmology, and to do so in ways that do justice both to the contingency and specificity of the past and also to the large patterns that help make sense of the details" (7).

the end of the nineteenth century democratic history became a victim of the very rationalism it purported to be a product of, in the twentieth century it became a victim, like rationalism itself, of postmodernism.[286] At first, it came into view as failing to live up to standards of modern science. Then, it came into view as being "Eurocentric" for having tried.

Nevertheless, despite these efforts democratic historians of the kind that Tocqueville describes did not so much vanish as they did rebrand themselves—as political scientists, sociologists, geographers, and evolutionary psychologists. According to Kerwin Lee Klein, "the idea that we have escaped universal history threatens to become an article of academic faith."[287] But an article of faith, whether academic or otherwise, is just that: a universally accepted belief in something that upon reflection may not *actually* be true. "None of us, it seems, wants to be a narrative master of squishy metaphysics and totalitarian politics," writes Klein. But "whether careful policing of our own storytelling habits will keep us from that fate is another question."[288] The truth is that "we remain haunted by history, returning ever and again to the big story even as we anxiously affirm our clean break with the evils of narrative mastery."[289] As evidence, one need only consult Brett Bowden's recent book *The Strange Persistence of Universal History in Political Thought*.

In this book, Bowden shows how,

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[286] Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 232–33.
[287] Kerwin Lee Klein, "In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People without History," *History and Theory* Vol. 34, No. 4 (1995), 276.
[288] Klein, 276.
[289] Klein, 276.

> Despite the occasional dissenting voices, the idea of universal history remains central to the Western tradition of studying and theorizing about history, progress, civilization, and human perfectibility. It is a big-picture version of history that seeks to explain and document the history of humankind—savages, barbarians, and the civilized—as a single coherent unit of study. It is about fitting all peoples and places into the narrative of history, which means placing them somewhere on a continuum between the poles of state of nature and civilized modernity. At the same time, it means knowing that all will ultimately arrive at the same end: civilization, or Western modernity.[290]

To be sure, since the rise of democratic history much has happened in the world that, on its face, would seem to undermine the ontological assumptions (assumptions that, as we have seen, are at their core theological in origin) on which it is predicated. Major and regrettable world historical events including World War One and World War Two stand in the way of, if not totally refute, the legitimacy of these assumptions. Yet as Bowden observes, while "the catastrophic events of the first half of the twentieth century—the First and Second World Wars, including the Holocaust, and the Great Depression in between—put something of a dent in the air of confidence surrounding the idea of progress…the wavering of faith in the general idea of progress was less than fatal."[291]

In the 1950s and 60s, comparative political scientists essentially re-packaged democratic history in the guise of "modernization theory"—a theory that despite also being accused of ethnocentrism, *also* nevertheless persists.[292] "Most writers on

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[290] Brett Bowden, *The Strange Persistence of Universal History in Political Thought* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 25.
[291] Bowden, 66.
[292] In the *End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama argues that "the charge of ethnocentrism spelled the death knell for modernization theory" (69). But as it turns out, the theory is alive and well—not only inside but also and especially outside of the academy. Inside the academy, scholars continue to debate whether the "modernization hypothesis" is valid. See, for instance, Daron Acemoglu et al., "Reevaluating the Modernization Hypothesis," *Journal of Monetary Economics* Vol. 56, No. 8 (2009): 1043–58; and more recently, Nils Gilman, "Modernization Theory Never Dies," *History of Political Economy* Vol. 50, No. 1 (2018): 133–51. Alternatively, outside of the academy the idea of modernization—which today goes by the more politically correct term "development"—is as axiomatic as the idea of progress was axiomatic for Tocqueville's democratic historians. See Bowden, *The Strange Persistence of Universal History in Political Thought*, 71–72.

modernization," observes Samuel Huntington, "implicitly or explicitly assign nine characteristics to the modernization process."[293] Not only do they argue that modernization is a "revolutionary," "complex," and "systemic," process, but also—and for our purposes, more importantly—a "*global*," "*lengthy*," "*phased*," "*homogenizing*," "*irreversible*," and "*progressive*" one.[294] Thus, as Huntington concludes, "many of the characteristics and consequences which the post-World War II theorists ascribed to the Grand Process of Modernization" can actually be found in the "writings of nineteenth century writers such as Herbert Spencer and Karl Marx"—both of whom would no doubt qualify as "democratic historians" of the kind that, as we have seen, Tocqueville describes.[295]

In the 1980's and early 1990's, Francis Fukuyama revived for a less than philosophic audience Hegel's—or rather Kojève's *disputed interpretation* of Hegel's—philosophy of history. In a now famous essay published in *The National Interest* titled "The End of History?" he argued that "while it is impossible to rule out the sudden appearance of new ideologies or previously unrecognized contradictions in liberal societies," what Kojève posited in his lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* is essentially right: history has ended; the fundamental principles of liberty and equality are here to stay.[296] Consequently, in his view to understand the end of the Cold War as simply the end of a protracted rivalry between two superpowers would be to overlook something much more important—nay, *meaningful*; for as he went on to argue,

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[293] Samuel P. Huntington, "The Change to Change: Modernization, Development, and Politics," *Comparative Politics* Vol. 3, No. 3 (April 1971): 288.
[294] Huntington, 288–90 (emphasis mine).
[295] Huntington, 292.
[296] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, No. 16 (1989): 16.

> What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.[297]

As discussed in the previous chapter, despite breaking with the Christian tradition, Voltaire (in Christian fashion) nevertheless manages to find "meaning" in history as well; he simply locates in it in the modern idea of progress instead of the Christian idea of divine providence. He locates this meaning, in other words, in what Tocqueville calls the "indefinite perfectibility of man," an idea which holds out the promise that humanity is moving towards some nebulous end point in history, an "immense grandeur" that it can but vaguely make out or see. In this essay (and later on in his book), Fukuyama does something similar, but with one important difference: whereas for Voltaire this immense grandeur remains "ideal and always fleeting"—a mirage that continually suggests but that never confirms some kind of linear movement towards a definite "end"—for Fukuyama as for Kojève's Hegel this immense grandeur is neither ideal nor always fleeting. Rather, it is *real* because it is already here. It is not that humanity it is moving *towards* some nebulous immense grandeur or golden age that it can but dimly make out; it is that humanity has already arrived because, according to Fukuyama, what Tocqueville dubs an "ideal and always fleeting perfection" is but modern democracy itself.

Finally, in the year 2000 journalist Robert Wright published an influential, best-selling book titled *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*—a book "about how we [humanity] got where we are today, and what this tells us about where we're heading

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[297] Fukuyama, 4.

next."[298] According to Wright, those who claim that there is no directionality to history are simply wrong; for as he states,

> When you look beneath the roiled surface of human events, beyond the comings and goings of particular regimes, beyond the lives and deaths of the 'great men' who have strutted on the stage of history, you see an arrow beginning tens of thousands of year ago and continuing to the present. And, looking ahead, you see where it is pointing.[299]

Leo Strauss may have thought that for the "unbiased historian, 'the historical process' revealed itself as the meaningless web spun by what men did, produced, and thought, no more than by unmitigated chance—a tale told by an idiot."[300] Like Fukuyama, however, Wright would obviously beg to differ. No, he does not rely on Kojève's Hegel to advance his argument. But that is because he does not have to. For him, the historical process is neither a meaningless web spun by the thoughts and actions of men *nor* a product of unmitigated chance. It is the product of what appear to be less than contingent "non-zero-sum" interactions between human beings over time. It is the product, he ultimately suggests, of some kind of teleological process that far from being at odds with evolution appears to employ evolution as a means.[301]

Despite being attacked and rejected by professional historians, then, democratic history has not only survived but outside of the ivory tower has continued to thrive. Indeed, as the commercial success of books like Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*: *The Fates of Human*

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[298] According to Bill Clinton, this book had a "huge effect" on his thinking as president. See https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/30/bill-clintons-world/

[299] Robert Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2001), 17.

[300] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (University of Chicago Press, 1953), 18. According to Strauss, this view of the historical process is "fundamentally the classical view."

[301] Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*, 315. As Wright puts it, "It may indeed be that evolution is not teleological. But if that's the case, then evolution is the only thing I can think of that exhibits flexible directionality via information processing and isn't teleological."

*Societies* (1997), Robert Wright's *Non-Zero* (2000), Yuval Noah Herari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2011), and most recently, Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (2018) would seem to suggest, charges of being "unscientific" and "Eurocentric" have, quite simply, failed to relieve the proverbial "many" of what can only be described as a persistent attraction to "the big story."[302]

My goal in this chapter, therefore, is to explain why despite being criticized from within the academy, this attraction to "the big story" remains so pervasive outside of it. Bowden calls the persistence of big-picture, progressive theories of history "strange." But as an in-depth examination of Part 1, Volume 2 of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* reveals, what seems strange from the perspective of academics is much less strange than meets the eye. Expanding on the logic underlying his analysis of the democratic attraction to pantheism, I argue that the persistence of democratic history ultimately stems from the widespread adoption of a philosophical method that Tocqueville at first associates with the Americans: "to seek on one's own and in oneself alone the reason for things;" to "rely solely on the unaided effort of [one's] own individual reason." According to Tocqueville, such a method fosters mores (sentiments, instincts, and opinions) that in turn conspire to make certain philosophical doctrines and political ideas especially attractive to

[302] Since its publication in 1992, Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* has been translated into over 20 languages and has sold over 20 million copies world-wide. Similarly, Robert Wright's *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* has sold over 10 million copies, was routinely referenced by President Bill Clinton when it came out, and was a New York Times Book Review Notable Book in the year 2000. Other examples of what might be called neo-democratic histories include Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997) and most recently Yuval Noah Herari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2011), both of which remain widely popular outside of the academy, despite being heavily criticized within it.

democratic peoples: "pantheism" in the realm of philosophy and "centralization" in the realm politics, respectively. What he stops short of fully articulating, however, is how these same mores conspire to make another idea attractive as well: the idea that a "single design" presides over the destiny of the human race as a whole; that human history is both universal and meaningful—just as democratic historians, as we have seen, have a tendency to argue. In what follows, therefore, I show how this same philosophical method and the habits of mind that it in turn fosters also accounts for the democratic attraction to what might be called pantheism's historical analog. For as we shall see, just as pantheism comes into view as something that, in a post-Christian world, attaches meaning to democratic man's existence in space (nature), so democratic history comes into view as something that, in a post-Christian world, attaches meaning to his existence in time (history).

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD OF DEMOCRATIC MAN

In Chapter 1 of Part 1, Volume 2 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville discusses what he calls the "philosophical method of the Americans." "I think that in no country in the civilized world," he begins rather disparagingly, "is there less interest in philosophy than in the United States." The Americans "have no philosophical school of their own," and they "worry very little" about the various schools that "divide Europe."[303] They are, in a sense, unburdened by thought and so concern themselves primarily if not exclusively with action. Interestingly enough, however, this does not mean that they have

[303] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 698.

no "common philosophical method." On the contrary, because they "direct their minds in the same way, and conduct them according to the same rules," they do indeed have such a method, Tocqueville insists; they simply have not "taken to the trouble to define its rules."[304]

What is that method? According to Tocqueville it would seem to consist in a number of features. For instance, it would seem to consist in being free from the systematic spirit, the "yoke of habits," "the maxims of family," the "opinions of class," and, to a certain point, "the prejudices of the nation." Furthermore, this method would seem to consist in accepting "tradition only as information" and treating information only as a means—as something that can be employed to either do things "differently," or "better." Yet, as he eventually tells us, all of these features are derivative of—and hence can actually be reduced to—a single more "principle" one: seeking "by yourself and in yourself alone the reason for things" or, as he finally describes it, relying exclusively on the "individual effort" of one's own "reason."[305]

It turns out, then, that despite having "no philosophical school of their own," the Americans have a common philosophical method that is nevertheless consistent with one. "America is one of the countries of the world where the precepts of Descartes are least studied and best followed," Tocqueville famously declares. Obviously, Americans do not read his works—as noted above, they are unconcerned with philosophy. Yet, this disinterest in philosophy does not really matter. For according to Tocqueville, the very

[304] Tocqueville, 699.
[305] Tocqueville, 699.

thing that "diverts" Americans from philosophy also "naturally disposes" them to adopt Descartes' maxims: their democratic social-state.[306]

Democracy has a way of undermining traditional forms of authority. To begin with, it has a way of undermining the authority of ancestral wisdom. "Amid the constant movement that reigns within a democratic society," writes Tocqueville, "the bond that links generations together weakens or breaks; each man easily loses track of the ideas of his ancestors, or is hardly concerned about them."[307] At the same time, however, democracy subverts the authority of class opinion. "Nor can the men who live in such a society draw their beliefs from the opinions of class," he continues, "for they are so to speak no longer any classes…"[308] Perhaps most significantly, democracy subverts the authority of intelligence itself. "As for the action that the intelligence of one man can have on that of another," explains Tocqueville, "it is necessarily very limited in a country where citizens, having become more or less similar, all see each other at very close range."[309] Consequently, as a result of their democratic social-state Americans are left with *nothing other* than their own reason as a source of intellectual authority and thus with *no choice* but to become Cartesian. Democracy, it would appear, teaches Descartes without assigning him.

And yet, it is not that simple. For as it also turns out, Americans are not so much the unwitting followers of Descartes as Descartes is a "proto-American." According to Tocqueville, even though Descartes, unlike the Americans, *did* take the time and effort to

[306] Tocqueville, 699–700.
[307] Tocqueville, 700.
[308] Tocqueville, 700.
[309] Tocqueville, 700.

define the rules of this method, *he no less than* the Americans was a student of democracy. This method, explains Tocqueville in an editorial note, "was discovered in a period when men began to become equal and similar to one another," and this was no accident. Men who live "during these centuries," he explains in a footnote, are "particularly disposed by their social-state to find and to accept [it]."[310] It would be wrong, then, to assume that Descartes somehow conceived of this method on his own. "Like all great revolutionaries," writes Tocqueville in discarded fragment, what he effectively did was make "clear and systematic" ideas that were "*already*" in the minds of most people.[311] Put another way, what Descartes effectively did was give form to a method that democracy disclosed *to him*, not that he disclosed to others.

Accordingly, it is important to recognize that despite calling it "the philosophical method of the Americans," this method is no more American than it is Cartesian, and no more Cartesian than it is, strictly speaking, American. Rather, it is *democratic*—which is also to say that it is as American as it is Cartesian and hence *as European* as it is American, just as Tocqueville proceeds to argue. "This same method," continues Tocqueville, also "became established and popularized in Europe"—and it did so for essentially the same reason. Beginning in the sixteenth century, "the men of the Reformation," writes Tocqueville, subjected "some of the dogmas of the ancient faith to individual reason; but they continued to exclude all the others from discussion."[312] Then, in the seventeenth century Bacon effected in the natural sciences what Descartes

[310] Tocqueville, 703. See note "o."
[311] Tocqueville, 702. See note "n."
[312] Tocqueville, 702.

accomplished in "philosophy strictly speaking:" he abolished "formulas," destroyed "the rule of traditions," and overthrew the "authority of the master."[313] Finally, in the eighteenth century "philosophers" undertook "to submit to the individual examination of each man the object of all his beliefs."[314] However, as Tocqueville eventually concludes, while the men of the Reformation and, following them, Bacon and Descartes, may have established this method in Europe, neither them nor the philosophers of the eighteenth century *popularized* it. It was only when conditions "had finally become nearly similar and men almost the same," argues Tocqueville, that this method became generally followed.[315] It was only when Europeans became more American (ie. democratic) that they too became Cartesian.

In sum, when Tocqueville tells us that relying solely on one's own reason characterizes American thinking, what he at the same time means is that relying solely one's own reason characterizes how democratic peoples *in general* think. Indeed, the observation that Europeans *as much as* Americans operate according to this method confirms that what Tocqueville calls the "philosophical method of the Americans" is American in name only. In actuality, it is the philosophical method of what Pierre Manent calls "democratic man."[316]

## THE MORES OF DEMOCRATIC MAN

[313] Tocqueville, 702.
[314] Tocqueville, 703.
[315] Tocqueville, 705.
[316] Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 64.

According to Manent, when compared to his aristocratic predecessor democratic man is "in a very real sense" a "new man."[317] No, he does not differ in his biology from aristocratic mam. He is still a man in the most basic sense of the term. However, given his new-found condition of equality and corresponding new-found way of thinking—given, in other words, his new-found "philosophical method"—he exhibits an altogether different moral and political psychology than his aristocratic ancestor. He has "mores" that are in a very real sense new "mores."

In Volume 1 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville makes a point of telling us that by the term "mores," he does not mean "mores strictly speaking, which could be called habits of the heart." To be sure, he means that. However, his understanding of the term mores is much broader. By mores means not only habits of the heart but also "the different notions that men possess," "the diverse opinions that are current among them," and "the ensemble of ideas from which the habits of the mind are formed." In short, he means what the ancients meant: "the whole moral and intellectual state of a people" or, more generally, aristocratic and democratic *peoples*.[318]

What, then, are the mores—the diverse opinions, ideas, and habits of mind—of democratic man? Arguably the most important is what Tocqueville calls his "passion for material-well-being," a passion that in turn gives him a certain predilection for materialism. According to Tocqueville, the passion for material well-being in America is general. That "everyone does not experience it in the same way" does not matter;

[317] Manent, 64.
[318] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 466–67.

"everyone feels it."[319] However, just as the philosophical method of the Americans is less American than it is democratic and hence as European as it is American, so too, it turns out, is this passion for material well-being. As Tocqueville proceeds to tell us, "something similar is seen more and more in Europe," as well.[320] Part of this, to be sure, is due to the fact that in a democratic social-state, a major psychological shift takes place in how both the rich and the poor, the few and the many, come to view their respective material conditions. Whereas for the first time the poor come to view their station in life as something that, potentially if not actually, can be improved upon, for the first time the rich come to view their station in life as precarious—as something which is as readily lost as it is gained.[321] Accordingly (and paradoxically), both the rich and the poor become inordinately focused on their material well-being. They become obsessed with acquiring or preserving the material comforts and pleasures they either do or do not yet have. At the same time, however, this passion for material well-being also stems from a major psychological shift in how democratic man, when compared to his aristocratic predecessor, regards "the supernatural." As Tocqueville explains, because he sees that he can "without help" solve all of the "small difficulties" that life might throw at him, democratic man perceives the world as rationally ordered. He assumes that how the world operates is knowable by means of human reason alone, and so believes that "nothing is beyond the limits of intelligence."[322] In effect, democratic man comes to develop what Tocqueville calls "little faith in the extraordinary and an invincible distaste for the

[319] Tocqueville, 931.
[320] Tocqueville, 931.
[321] Tocqueville, 933.
[322] Tocqueville, 701.

supernatural." He comes to disregard anything apart from or transcendent of the natural world, and thus easily loses sight of the "non-material pleasures" that only religion, according to Tocqueville, can provide.[323] In fact, he is liable to conclude that there simply are none of these pleasures because as Tocqueville later tells us, his passion for material well-being may well lead him to conclude that "everything," including even himself, is "only matter."[324] In sum, democratic man's passion for material well-being fosters in him a corresponding predilection for materialism. To the extent that he disdains looking upwards towards heaven, his gaze remains fixated on the earth and thus on his corporeal self, forgetting almost entirely about the immaterial and therewith it, his soul.

A second habit of mind characteristic of democratic man is his preference for the useful over the beautiful, a preference which in turn gives him a certain predilection for utilitarianism. In Tocqueville's view, democratic man's preference for the useful over the beautiful is so obvious that it is barely worth pointing out. He even suggests that by doing so, he may-well be wasting both his time and that of his readers.[325] However, as Tocqueville also states in his editorial notes, this idea "is too important to be found only accidentally in my book. The preeminence granted in all things to the useful is in fact one of the principal and fertile characteristics of democratic centuries."[326] According to Tocqueville, there are several reasons why democratic man prefers the useful to the beautiful, but the main reason is his passion for material well-being, as discussed above. That he is concerned, above all, with making life "comfortable" means that when it

[323] Tocqueville, 701.
[324] Tocqueville, 958.
[325] Tocqueville, 788.
[326] Tocqueville, 789. See note "c."

comes to cultivating the "arts"—both technical and fine—he will cultivate those that best facilitate living a comfortable life ie. those that are most useful to his material well-being.[327] Democratic man is therefore as much given to the philosophical doctrine of utilitarianism as he is to materialism. Just as his passion for material well-being makes him naturally disposed to embrace the latter, so his preference for what is useful makes him naturally disposed to embrace the former: he "will want the beautiful to be useful."[328]

A third habit of mind characteristic of democratic man is a fondness of the "the real" over "the ideal," a fondness which in turns gives him a certain predilection for empiricism. Because he is accustomed to relying only on himself as "witness," he loves to see anything that concerns him "very clearly…"[329] Not only is he therefore ready to "deny" what he cannot immediately understand, he is also quick to "push aside" anything that might be said to obscure his sight. Consequently, just as democratic man harbors "an invincible distaste for the supernatural" and just as he prefers the useful to the beautiful, so he harbors a profound contempt for "forms" and, as Tocqueville later reveals, "the ideal."[330] "Poetry," writes Tocqueville, "is the search for and portrayal of the ideal;" its aim is to embellish the truth and in so doing, "offer a higher image to the mind."[331] Insofar as democratic man naturally seeks to push aside anything that stands between him and "the truth," however, he neither desires nor appreciates what poetry aims to do and thus offers. On the contrary, he devotes himself to "imagining the useful and representing

[327] Tocqueville, 789.
[328] Tocqueville, 789.
[329] Tocqueville, 701.
[330] Tocqueville, 701.
[331] Tocqueville, 832.

the real."[332] Because he is accustomed to trusting only in what he himself can verify, he has little appreciation for anything other than what is directly observable. In keeping with his predilection for materialism and utilitarianism, then, he also has a corresponding predilection for empiricism; for just as he loses sight of the immaterial and the beautiful, so he loses sight of the ideal.[333]

A fourth habit of mind characteristic of democratic man is his ironic willingness to accept without examination whatever the majority of people around him happen to believe. From the foregoing, it would seem as though democratic man is much more independent minded than his aristocratic ancestor. It would seem that, by comparison, he is a man who "thinks for himself." Interestingly enough, however, democratic man is on the whole less independent minded than he might at first seem, and thus as Tocqueville at first presents him. Yes, he thinks for himself. But only to the extent that doing so does not hamper his ability to function as an individual. "If man was forced to prove to himself all the truths that he uses every day," observes Tocqueville, he would never finish doing so; he would wear himself out with preliminary demonstrations without advancing."[334] He would, in effect, paralyze himself. Accordingly, as independent minded as he considers himself to be, like all human beings (including even philosophers) democratic man nevertheless needs to accept certain things on faith, too. He too needs what Tocqueville terms "dogmatic beliefs." Otherwise, he would enter into a state of "perpetual agitation,"

[332] Tocqueville, 833.
[333] For a more detailed analysis of democratic man's preference for the ideal over the real, see Dana Jalbert Stauffer, "Tocqueville on the Modern Moral Situation: Democracy and the Decline of Devotion," *American Political Science Review* Vol. 108, No. 4 (November 2014): 772–82.
[334] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 714.

a constant state of intellectual uncertainty.[335] The only question is from where these dogmatic beliefs will come and how powerful their source will be. Or as Tocqueville himself puts it: "the question is not to know if an intellectual authority exists in democratic centuries, but only to know where its repository is and what its extent will be."[336]

According to Tocqueville, its repository is "common opinion" and what its extent will be is troubling to say the least. "When conditions are unequal and men dissimilar," he explains, there is, on the one hand, some individuals who are "very enlightened, very learned, [and] very powerful because of their intelligence," and there is, on the other hand, a multitude of ignorant individuals who are very "limited" in their intelligence.[337] The multitude is therefore much more likely to put its faith in the "superior reason of one man or of one class" more than trust its own reason. Aristocracy, unlike democracy, operates in accordance with the wisdom of the few—not the many. In "centuries of equality," however, the opposite is true. "As citizens become equal and more similar," the tendency of each of them to "blindly" believe in a "certain man or class decreases," while the tendency "to believe in the mass increases…"[338] Thus, the intellectual authority of one man or class is replaced by the intellectual authority of the multitude, the wisdom of the few with what contemporary democratic theorists, following Aristotle, call the "wisdom of the many."[339]

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[335] Tocqueville, 715.
[336] Tocqueville, 717.
[337] Tocqueville, 717.
[338] Tocqueville, 717.
[339] See, for instance, Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 77.

Yet, unlike contemporary democratic theorists, Tocqueville does not regard the wisdom of the many as inherently "superior" to the wisdom of the few. According to Hélène Landemore, to the extent that there is more "cognitive diversity" among the many than there is among the few, "the epistemic properties of democracy make it superior to dictatorship and any plausible variant of the rule of the few."[340] But from the perspective of Tocqueville, to believe this is tantamount to believing in justice of one's own partisanship. "The wisdom of the many is part of the ideology of democracy, not its reality."[341] The reality is that because "common opinion" is the *only* source of dogmatic beliefs in democracy—because it is "the sole guide that remains for individual reason"—the epistemic *structure* of democracy makes it so democracy is, paradoxically enough, not only *much less* cognitively diverse than aristocracy (and hence, much less wise than Landemore believes), but also, much more cognitively oppressive as well. As the *only* source of dogmatic beliefs in democracy, common opinion exercises a hitherto unimaginable power over the minds of men. Rather than simply "persuade" them of its beliefs, common opinion "imposes" its beliefs on them because rather than simply appeal to their reason, it "penetrates" their souls.[342] In reality, the wisdom of the many is more monolithic and oppressive, not diverse and "superior."

Consequently, common opinion makes democratic man more intellectually servile than he arguably needs to be. As Tocqueville earlier remarks, although it is true that "every man who receives an opinion on the word of others puts his mind into slavery,"

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[340] Hélène Landemore, "Democratic Reason: The Mechanisms of Collective Intelligence in Politics," in *Collective Wisdom*, ed. Jon Elster and Hélène Landemore (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 251–52.
[341] Jon Elster, "Conclusion," in *Collective Wisdom*, ed. Jon Elster and Hélène Landemore (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 395–96.
[342] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 719.

such slavery is actually quite salutary.[343] As mentioned above, without this slavery or something like it, man's mind would remain in a state of "perpetual agitation" making his "intelligence" at once "independent and weak." Such slavery is therefore a good thing in that it functions as an intellectual ballast which "allows" men to make "good use of liberty."[344] Democratic man, however, subjects his mind to a kind of slavery that, far from allowing him to make good use of his liberty induces him instead to forfeit that liberty—to embrace common opinion not as a guide for individual reason but as a replacement for his individual reason altogether. "You can predict that faith in common opinion will become a sort of religion whose prophet will be the majority," writes Tocqueville, and this spells danger for the future. The hitherto unprecedented amount of intellectual authority that common opinion wields may well become "too great" and thus may well "enclose the action of individual reason within more narrow limits than are suitable for the grandeur and happiness of the human species."[345]

Finally, democratic man has what Tocqueville terms an "aptitude and taste for general ideas." As in the case of dogmatic beliefs, relying on "general ideas" is less a function of choice than necessity. Because man is not God—because he cannot see "all the beings who make up humanity" separately—man must generalize.[346] He must, on account of his relative intellectual weakness, do what God has no need to do. He must "encompass a very great number of analogous objects within the same form in order to think about them more comfortably." Otherwise, explains Tocqueville, man would

[343] Tocqueville, 715–16.
[344] Tocqueville, 716.
[345] Tocqueville, 724.
[346] Tocqueville, 726.

become "lost amid the immensity of details and would no longer see anything."[347] He would become as intellectually confused as a man without dogmatic beliefs would become perpetually agitated. He would not be able to make rapid judgements about "a great many things at once" and hence would not be able to operate in a world that, unlike the world of aristocracy, often requires him to do just that.

Even so, unlike aristocratic man, democratic man has an aptitude and taste for general ideas that far exceeds what necessity alone requires and again, this is largely because of his philosophical method. As Tocqueville explains:

> I showed previously how equality of conditions brought each man to search for truth by himself. It is easy to see that such a method must imperceptibly make the human mind tend toward general ideas.
>
> When I repudiate the traditions of class, of profession and of family, when I escape from the rule of example in order, by the sole effort of my reason, to search for the path to follow, I am inclined to draw the grounds of my opinions from the very nature of man, which brings me necessarily and almost without my knowing, toward a great number of very general notions.[348]

Here, Tocqueville reveals that just as the philosophic method of democratic man has a way of making him more intellectually servile than his aristocratic ancestor, so it has a way of making him less intellectually sophisticated than his aristocratic ancestor, as well. Seeking his way by the light of unaided reason alone, he not only becomes inordinately dependent on common opinion for his dogmatic beliefs, but also, on a single axiom for his opinions: human nature. Thus, he is not only liable adopt a "host of ready-made" moral and political "opinions" but a host of ready-made moral and political opinions that apply to humanity as a whole. He is liable, in short, to become a proponent of either

[347] Tocqueville, 727.
[348] Tocqueville, 734.

liberalism or socialism—ideologies which are predicated on universal claims about what human beings need and long for most.

## THE SELF-NEGATING TENDENCY OF DEMOCRATIC MAN

As I briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, in Chapter 12 of Part 2, Volume 2 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville explains why material well-being alone will never satisfy man's most profound spiritual longings. Despite just how materialistic the United States is (and Europe is becoming), "religious madness is very common there," he writes, and this "must not surprise us." "Man has not given himself the taste for the infinite and the love of what is immortal," he explains. "These sublime instincts do not arise from a caprice of the will; they have their unchanging foundation in his nature; they exist despite his efforts. He can hinder and deform them, but not destroy them."[349] Important to recognize, however, is that *precisely because* of his new mores, democratic man is naturally (and tragically) predisposed to try, regardless.

According to Tocqueville, when compared to spiritualism, materialism suffers from a natural disadvantage. "When you read Plato," he writes, "you notice that in the times prior to him and in his time, many writers existed who advocated materialism." However, the fact that most of their works have either not survived or, if they have, exist in only fragmentary form tells of something important: that as a philosophical doctrine, materialism finds little support among human beings because as a philosophical doctrine, materialism is simply contrary to human nature.[350]

[349] Tocqueville, 940.
[350] Tocqueville, 959.

Scholars disagree over the extent to which Tocqueville believes in human nature, and for good reason. In *A Fortnight in the Wilderness*, he seems to deny its very existence. In the midst of recounting his time on the Saginaw Trail, he writes the following:

> Philosophers have believed that human nature is everywhere the same and varies only according to the institutions and the laws of different societies. *That is one of those opinions that every page of the history of the world seems to belie*. Nations, like individuals, all appear with a physiognomy that is their own. The characteristic features of their countenance are reproduced throughout all the transformations that they undergo.[351]

It would therefore seem that for Tocqueville there simply is no such thing as a "human nature" that transcends time and place, and hence that scholars like Michael Zuckert are right when they argue, for instance, that Tocqueville's political science takes its bearings from the "social state" and not from human nature, because for Tocqueville the human being is "at bottom… 'nothing.'"[352] Yet as many other scholars point out, there is also a substantial amount of textual evidence which suggests that Tocqueville *does*, ultimately, believe in a constant human nature and hence that however distinct the physiognomy of both nations and individuals might be, there is, in his view something about the nature of man that nevertheless transcends time and place such as, for instance, the "sublime instincts," mentioned above.[353] Indeed, one need only consider what he says regarding

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[351] Tocqueville, 1347–48.
[352] Michael Zuckert, "On Social State," in Tocqueville's *Defense of Human Liberty: Current Essays*, ed. by Peter Augustine Lawler and Joseph Alulis (Garland Publishing, 1993), 8. See also Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt*, *John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 92-93; 109; Ken Masugi, "Citizens and Races: Natural Rights versus History" in *Tocqueville's Defense of Human Liberty: Current Essays*, ed. Joseph Alulis and Peter Augustine Lawler (Garland, 1993), 326, 328; and Thomas G. West, "Misunderstanding the American Founding," in *Interpreting Tocqueville's Democracy in America,* ed. Ken Masugi (Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), 155; 161-72.
[353] See, for instance, Sarah Beth V. Kitch, "The Immovable Foundations of the Infinite and Immortal: Tocqueville's Philosophical Anthropology," *American Journal of Political Science* Vol. 60, No. 4 (October 2016): 947–57; Alexander Jech, "'Man Simply': Excavating Tocqueville's Conception of Human Nature,"

the relationship between religion and human nature in the *Ancient Regime*. According to Tocqueville, "The rules of conduct that religions lay down pertain not so much to man in a particular country or period as to the son, the father, the servant, the master, the neighbor. *Because religions are thus rooted in human nature*, they can be accepted equally by all men and applied everywhere."[354] If nothing else, then, Tocqueville *does* seem to think that there is a spiritual dimension to human existence, to human "being" which is not *simply* the product of convention.

In fact, like Pascal he seems to think that precisely because of this spiritual dimension to human existence, human beings are at their core divided. In a letter to his close friend, Louis de Kergorlay, Tocqueville remarks that there are three authors with whom he lives a "little every day:" Pascal, Montesquieu, and Rousseau.[355] However, as many scholars observe, when it comes to his understanding of human nature, Tocqueville is especially indebted to Pascal.[356] In several passages in the *Pensées*, Pascal posits something that Tocqueville apparently agrees with: that man is neither beast nor angel,

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*Perspectives on Political Science* Vol. 42 (2013): 84–93; and Donald J. Maletz, "Tocqueville on Human Nature," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy Winter* (2010): 183–202. See also Manent, *The Nature of Democracy*, 75. As Manent puts it, "Throughout his work, [Tocqueville] speaks of man—his thought, his passions, and action—as of something that is surely modified by the social states, democratic or aristocratic, but that is implicitly one. Human nature, implicitly one, is his frame of reference. Tocqueville is not a relativist."

[354] Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, 20.

[355] Alexis de Tocqueville, "Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Louis de Kergorlay," in *Œuvres complètes Vol. 13*, ed. André Jardin and Jean-Alain Lesourd (Gallimard, 1977), 418.

[356] See Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, 73–87; Alexander Jech, "Tocqueville, Pascal, and the Transcendent Horizon," *American Political Thought* Vol. 5 (2016): 109–31; Michael Locke McLendon, "Tocqueville, Jansenism, and the Psychology of Human Freedom," *American Journal of Political Science* Vol. 50 (2006): 664–75; Harvey C. Mansfield, *Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction*, 53; Alan Kahan, "Democratic Grandeur: How Tocqueville Constructed His New Moral Science in America," in *Tocqueville's Voyages*, ed. by Christine Dunn Henderson (Liberty Fund, 2014), 177–201; Aaron L. Herold, "Tocqueville on Religion, Enlightenment, and the Democratic Soul," *American Political Science Review* Vol. 109 (2015): 523–34; and Kitch, "Immovable Foundations," 947–57.

but a combination of both.[357] Indeed, near the end of Part 1, Volume 2, of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville argues that while human beings and animals have the "same senses" and "more or less the same desires," human beings nonetheless differ from animals in one crucial respect: whereas animals use their "instinct alone" to find "material goods," human beings use their "souls."[358] As a result, while human beings, like animals, exhibit a primordial concern for the body—for that which is mortal and finite—they also and unlike animals exhibit a concern for that which transcends the body—for that which is immortal and infinite. They are, Tocqueville tells us, part "brute" *and* part "angel" and thus are "capable of rising above the goods of the body and even of scorning life, an idea animals do not even conceive."[359]

That it is the instinct and taste of humanity to "uphold" the doctrine of spiritualism and not materialism, according to Tocqueville, should therefore come as no surprise.[360] In his editorial notes for Chapter of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville distinguishes between what he calls the "final outcome" of materialism and the "final outcome" of spiritualism. The final outcome of materialism, he explains, is to be concerned "only with satisfying the needs of the body and to forget about the soul." It is to live like the Roman Emperor Heliogabalus. Alternatively, the final outcome of spiritualism is "to flee into the deserts, to inflict sufferings and privations on yourself in order to live the life of the soul;" that is, to live like St. Jerome.[361] Neither way of life, Tocqueville concludes, is suitable for humanity; for whereas each of them are "suitable

[357] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Roger Ariew (Hackett, 2005), 141; 170.
[358] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, 963.*
[359] Tocqueville, 964.
[360] Tocqueville, 959.
[361] Tocqueville, 960. See note "k."

for some men," neither are suitable for most. However, as he also seems to suggest, despite our primordial concern for the body, we human beings nevertheless exhibit a greater respect (if not personal preference) for the life of Saint Jerome—for the final outcome of spiritualism—than we do for the life of Heliogabalus. According to Tocqueville, "Most of the great literary reputations are joined with spiritualism" and this, he assures us, is no coincidence. As a doctrine which emphasizes the immortality of the soul over and against the mortality of the body, spiritualism appeals to that part of us which makes us more than mere brutes. It appeals to that part of us which, for all intents and purposes, makes us "human" beings to begin with. Alternatively, as a philosophical doctrine which acknowledges only the reality of the brute—which teaches, in effect, that the angel does not actually exist—materialism precludes itself from ever being embraced wholeheartedly by man as a human being ie. as more than mere brute. For as Tocqueville tells us, "The heart of man is more vast than you suppose; it can at the same time enclose the taste for the good things of the earth and the love of the good things of heaven; sometimes the heart seems to give itself madly to one of the two; but it never goes for a long time without thinking of the other."[362]

Yet, what the heart of man cannot help but contemplate is an altogether different question from what democratic man, given his new opinions, sentiments, and instincts—given his new mores—is naturally disposed to scorn, regardless. According to Tocqueville, "it must not be believed that in any time, and in whatever political state, the passion for material enjoyments and the opinions that are linked with it will be able to

[362] Tocqueville, 960. See note "k."

suffice for an entire people."[363] However, to say that the philosophical doctrine of materialism will fail to "suffice for an entire people" is not to say that "the taste and instinct of humanity" will, in democratic centuries, somehow continue to uphold the doctrine of spiritualism as it did in centuries past. In Chapter 2 of Part 1, Volume 2, Tocqueville reminds us that "in the preceding chapter," he explained how the "equality of conditions" makes democratic man "conceive a kind of instinctive unbelief in the supernatural…"[364] What Tocqueville did not explain in that chapter, however, is that as a direct result of this instinctive unbelief, democratic man has both "a very high and often quite exaggerated idea of human reason," on the one hand, and a corresponding very low opinion of revelation, on the other.[365] As Tocqueville explains, that democratic man looks to either himself or to common opinion for "truth" means not just that he will want to locate the "principal arbiter" of his beliefs "within humanity and not beyond," but that he will also regard any attempt to do the opposite as "ridiculous and unreasonable." In effect, democratic man will "not easily believe in divine missions" and "readily scoff at new prophets…" To the extent that he believes in the power of human reason he will scorn revelation, the supposed truth of which stands or falls on whether there is in fact something "beyond the limits of human intelligence."[366]

Consequently, when compared to the taste and instinct of humanity, the taste and instinct of democratic man is not so much to uphold the doctrine of spiritualism as it is to negate those qualities of soul which make him human to begin with. As a doctrine which

[363] Tocqueville, 959.
[364] Tocqueville, 717.
[365] Tocqueville, 717.
[366] Tocqueville, 717.

*does* locate the principal arbiter of man's beliefs outside and above humanity, spiritualism encourages human beings to look up—to transcend the body which is finite and mortal and instead contemplate the soul which is infinite and immortal. If we recall, however, given his new mores, democratic man is naturally disposed to look down—to focus on his body to the exclusion of his soul. Insofar as he has "little faith in the extraordinary and an almost invincible distaste for the supernatural;" that he has little patience for the beautiful understood as something separate from the useful; and to the extent that he prefers "the real" to "the ideal" means, in effect, that contrary to "man simply" democratic man prefers the body to the soul. It means, in effect, that he is naturally inclined to pursue the life of Heliogabalus than he is to look up to the example of Saint Jerome. Put a final way, it means that his *eros* has only a horizontal (as opposed to both a horizontal and a vertical) trajectory, and hence that his concern for the good is reducible to a concern for what is most immediately "his own."

In Plato's *Symposium*, the philosopher-priestess Diotima holds out the promise of being able to make the good "one's own always" by sketching an erotic ascent towards knowledge of the beautiful.[367] As she frames it, this ascent begins by being "pregnant in terms of body" but eventually leads to being "pregnant in terms of soul." It would be wrong, she explains, to assume that what separates the animals from human beings is *eros*. Even the animals—that is, insofar as they too exhibit some kind of concern for the good as it relates to "one's own"—can be said to possess it. Unlike the *eros* of human beings, however, their *eros* leads them only to procreate because as she explains, it makes

[367] Plato, *Symposium*, trans. by Seth Benardete (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 206a-b.

them pregnant in terms only of the body. It does not make them pregnant in terms of the soul. Their *eros* has only a horizontal trajectory in that what they perceive to be "good" is, essentially, the satisfaction of primordial desires which reflect a concern for what is most immediately their "own:" their bodies and their offspring. Human beings, however, differ. What is unique about human beings is that their erotic desires often transcend those of animals causing them to become pregnant in terms not simply of the body but also of the soul. And as Diotima explains, to be pregnant in terms of the soul is to perceive as being "good" the satisfaction of desires or longings that *transcend* those of animals, and hence that transcend what is most immediately "one's own."[368]

As evidenced above, however, although a human being democratic man would seem to exhibit few of these desires because he is naturally disposed to deny their very existence. According to Tocqueville, he cannot destroy these instincts because they have an "unchanging foundation in him nature." But whether or not he can destroy them is an altogether different question from whether or not he will try. The fact is that given his new mores, democratic man is nevertheless disposed to try and negate the very essence of that which distinguishes him from the animals to begin with. He is disposed to become a "modern slave:" an "intermediate being between brute and man."[369]

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FATE OF DEMOCRATIC MAN: RESTLESSNESS UNTO DEATH

In a lengthy footnote in Lecture Six of his *Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Alexander Kojève argues that at the end of history, man will "disappear." What he

[368] Plato, 208e-212a.
[369] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 551.

means by this, of course, is not that man will *literally* disappear—that is, cease to exist in a material or physical sense. Rather, he means that "man properly so-called" will disappear. He means only that man understood as a 'historical being'—a being distinct from animals—will disappear. As Kojève explains:

> The disappearance of Man et the end of History… is not a biological catastrophe…Man remains alive as animal in harmony with Nature or given Being. What disappears is man properly so-called…In point of fact, the end of human Time or History—that is, the definitive annihilation of Man properly so-called or of the free and historical individual—means quite simply the cessation of Action in the full sense of the term. Practically, this means: the disappearance of wars and bloody revolutions. And also the disappearance of Philosophy; for since Man himself no longer changes essentially, there is no longer any reason to change the (true) principles which are at the basis of his understanding of the World and of himself. But all the rest can be preserved indefinitely; eft, love, play, etc., etc.; in short, everything that makes Man happy.[370]

In his famous "Note to Second Edition" of his *Lectures*, Kojève admits that his argument in this passage "is ambiguous, not to say contradictory. If one accepts 'the disappearance of Man at the end of History,' if one asserts that 'Man remains alive as animal,' with the specification that 'what disappears is Man properly so-called,' one cannot say that 'all the rest can be preserved indefinitely: art, love, play."[371] Put another way, if at the end of history man has disappeared, then how can those things which are said to make man happy, "be preserved?" The answer to this question, according to Kojève, is that just as man will not *literally* disappear at the end of history, neither will all of those things that are said make him happy: "his arts, his loves, and his play."[372] They, too, will survive—but only insofar as they correspond to the essentially primordial needs of man understood as an animal living in harmony with nature. Thus, as Kojève proceeds to elaborate,

> If Man becomes an animal again, his arts, his loves, and his play must also become purely "natural" again…it would have to be admitted that after the end of History, men would construct their edifices and world of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin

[370] Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel,* 158-159.
[371] Kojève, 159.
[372] Kojève, 159.

> their webs, would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas would play like young animals, and would indulge in love like adult beasts. But one cannot then say that all this "makes Man *happy*." One would have to say that post-historical animals of the species Homo sapiens (which will live amidst abundance and complete security) will be content as a result of their artistic, erotic and playful behavior, in as much as, by definition, they will be contented with it.[373]

In effect, man at the end of history will not so much be "happy" as he will be "content." He will be "happy" in the sense that animals are said to be "happy" in that *like* animals, he too will want for nothing more or less than to live in abundance and complete security. He too will long for nothing more or less than what animals long for. His happiness will be the happiness of Nietzsche's "Last Man" because his *eros*, similar to the *eros* of democratic man, will cease to have a vertical trajectory.[374]

Now, at one point in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville appears to agree with Kojève that eventually "man properly so-called"—man understood as a being distinct from the animals—will indeed disappear. For just as Kojève posits that "if man becomes an animal again, his arts, his loves, his play must also become purely natural again," so Tocqueville argues that "If men ever succeed in being content with material goods, it is to be believed that they would little by little lose the art of producing them, and that they would end by enjoying them without discernment and without progress, *like the animals*."[375] Furthermore, in his analysis of "What Type of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear," Tocqueville entertains the possibility of a future where each nation has become "nothing more than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which

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[373] Kojève, 159.
[374] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra in The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann (Penguin Books, 1982), 129. As Zarathustra tells us, the last man asks the following: "What is love? What is creation? What is longing?" To the extent that he can be said to have *eros*, then, it is an *eros* characteristic of animals, not human beings.
[375] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 964.

the government is the shepherd."[376] He therefore seems open to (if not wholly on board with) the idea that at some point in the future democratic man will degrade himself to a point where his love of the immortal and taste for the infinite will in fact disappear—that democratic man will ultimately succeed in negating his own humanity.

Even so, unlike Kojève Tocqueville does not actually believe in the "end of history," much less that man 'properly so-called' is a *purely* historical being. In Volume One of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville discusses the nature of political parties in the United-States. However, in so doing he makes a revealing statement concerning how periods of political instability versus stability, motion versus rest, influence the human mind's perception of the movement of history. According to him,

> There are periods of time when nations feel tormented by such great ills that the idea of a total change in their political constitution occurs to their mind. There are other periods when the malaise is even more profound and when the social state itself is compromised. That is the time of great revolutions and great parties.
>
> Between these centuries of disorders and miseries, you find others when societies are at rest and when the human race seems to catch its breath. In truth, that is still only outward appearance. The march of time does not stop for peoples any more than for men; both advance each day toward an unknown future; and when we believe them stationary, it is because their movements escape us. They are men who are walking; to those who are running, they seem immobile.
>
> *Be that as it may, there are periods when the changes that take place in the political constitution and social state of peoples are so slow and so imperceptible, that men think they have arrived at a final state; the human mind then believes itself firmly seated on certain foundations and does not look beyond a certain horizon*.[377]

Here, Tocqueville explains why in his view those who believe there is an "end" to history are mistaken. In periods of history characterized by motion, men become cognizant of "the march of time"—something that, as Tocqueville presents it, is *unending*. It "*does not stop*," he tells us, whether for "peoples" or for "men." As a result, these are periods characterized by political possibility: they reveal to the human mind that nothing which

[376] Tocqueville, 1252.
[377] Tocqueville, 280.

currently is *has to be* and hence that the future is open-ended: "unknown." They are periods of revolution. Alternatively, in periods of history characterized by "rest" men lose sight of "the march of time" altogether. So it follows that these are periods characterized by political stasis: they do not so much reveal to human mind that the future is open-ended as they do convince the human mind that there is no future beyond the present. Unlike periods of history characterized by motion, then, periods of history characterized by rest obscure the "truth." The truth, explains Tocqueville, is that "rest" is an "outward appearance;" men (like Kojève or Fukuyama) who believe they have "arrived at a final state," who do not look beyond a certain horizon, simply do not recognize just how imperceptible and slow the march of time can sometimes be. They mistake "walking" for being "immobile."

Consequently, while the annihilation of "man properly so-called" is for Kojève something "*already present*," it remains for Tocqueville only a future possibility—and a far-fetched one at that.[378] As discussed above, although Tocqueville no doubt believes that human nature is malleable, he does not believe that it is so malleable as to be "nothing." Kojève, however, *does* believe that human nature is "nothing." Unlike Tocqueville, he explicitly affirms as much. Man "properly so-called," he writes, is "Time, and Time is History, and only History."[379] Man properly so-called is, strictly speaking, temporal. His existence or 'being' is therefore "nothing" or "nothingness" in that it is directly opposed to that of Space or Nature which, unlike Time or History, is

[378] Kojève, 161 (emphasis mine). The full quote reads: "Thus, Man's return to animality appeared no longer as a possibility that was yet to come, but as a certainty that was already present."
[379] Kojève, 159.

"eternal."[380] History, Kojève therefore argues, consists of nothing more or less than the negation of the opposition between Man or History (which is nothing), on the one hand, and Space or Nature (which is something), on the other. It is but a story of man's overcoming his temporal 'being' by conquering—through both his "Action" and his "Work"—that which is eternal (Nature).[381] At the end of Time (History), therefore, man properly so-called will have destroyed himself. He will disappear as a 'historical being' opposed to Space or Nature and become instead as a post-historical "animal" living in harmony with it. According to Kojève, man will become "re-animalized" and, in this state (which is both universal and homogeneous) will be perfectly satisfied or "content."[382] As intimated above, however, for Tocqueville man is *more* than just "Time" ie. "nothing." To be sure, he is partly that: his shift from 'being' aristocratic to 'becoming' democratic proves as much. But he is also "Space" in that he has certain "sublime instincts that do not arise from a caprice of the will" and hence that have an "unchanging [ie. eternal] foundation in his nature." Consequently, where Kojève is adamant Tocqueville is at best ambivalent. The latter is not convinced that "man properly so-called" is destined to annihilate himself and thereby "succeed in being content with material goods…like the animals." If he were, he would not call for "new political science" aimed at *preventing* such a fate. Rather, Tocqueville is convinced that *precisely because* man is more than "nothing," precisely because he more than just "time," he is in

[380] Kojève, 160.
[381] Kojève, 160.
[382] Kojève, 160.

his democratic form liable to suffer from an affliction, "a sickness," that aristocratic man never knew.

In his notes on Plato's *Laws*, Tocqueville claims that Plato's "doctrine is nothing but the application of morality to politics." It is an "admirable tendency," but something which should be "conducted by sober and practical minds…" Otherwise, he explains, it leads "to the absurd" which, in the case of Plato, it certainly did: "[Plato} wants the legislator to be involved in everything," writes Tocqueville—something that even "les centralisateurs français" [the French centralizers] concede and find ridiculous. Whether it be "property, family, amusements, meals, or music," Plato would have the legislator to regulate it all.[383] Nevertheless, in a deleted passage in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville admits that given the historical context in which Plato was writing, his doctrine comes into view as being less absurd than meets the eye. "When I see…Plato in his sublime reveries want to forbid commerce and industry to the citizens and, in order to relieve of them of coarse desires, want to take away even the possession of their children," writes Tocqueville, "I think of his contemporaries, *and the sensual democracy of Athens makes me understand the laws of this imaginary republic whose portrait he has drawn for us*."[384] True, in *Democracy in America* Tocqueville is referring specifically to Plato's *Republic* as opposed to Plato's *Laws*. If anything, however, this only reinforces Tocqueville's point: that by relieving citizens of their "coarse desires"—by forcing them to live like Saint Jerome instead of like Heliogabalus—Plato's otherwise absurd doctrine

[383] Alexis de Tocqueville, "Analyse de Platon," in *Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 16*, ed. François Mélonio (Gallimard, 1989), 555-557.
[384] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 40.

of the application of morality to politics at the very least prevents them from having to suffer from a sickness that democratic man, given his new mores, is all too susceptible to contract: what in the *Recollections* Tocqueville calls "the most common sickness of our time."[385]

In Volume 1 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville tells us that he "encountered in America passions analogous to those we see in Europe." However, as he also tells us, "only some" of these passions were due to the very nature of the human heart; others, to the democratic state of society." Chief among these are what he calls a "restlessness of heart," a passion that is "natural to man when, *all conditions being more or less equal*, each one see these chances to rise." [386] Unlike Pascal, therefore, Tocqueville understands restlessness as something that is either unique to or, at the very least, exacerbated by democracy.[387] For Pascal, restlessness is a defining feature of the human condition—something that plagues all human beings in all times and places. Given man's corrupted nature, he finds himself in a "wretched" situation. Unable to cure all that ails him, whether death or ignorance, he has "decided, in order to be happy, not to think about these things."[388] This, however, turns out to be but a delusory coping mechanism that does not so much furnish happiness as it does distract him from his wretchedness, which in the end will cause "inevitable distress." True happiness, insists Pascal, can only be achieved by submitting to God—by embracing faith over reason. For Tocqueville,

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[385] Alexis de Tocqueville, "Souvenirs," in *Œuvres complètes, Vol. 12*, ed. Luc Monnier (Gallimard, 1964), 171.
[386] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 503.
[387] Dana Stauffer, "The Most Common Sickness of Our Time: Tocqueville on Democratic Restlessness," *Review of Politics*, Vol. 80 (2018), 442. See also Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton University Press, 2013), 161.
388 Pascal, *Pensées*, 38.

however, this is not necessarily the case. At the beginning of his chapter titled "Why the Americans Appear So Restless Amidst Their Well-Being," he states that in certain remaining pockets of aristocracy, human beings are at once "ignorant" and "serene," "wretched" and "cheerful"—and for the following reason: unlike human beings in democracy, they do not exhibit an "immoderate desire for happiness in this world."

As discussed above, in an aristocratic social-state there simply is no "passion for material well-being." The rich do not desire what they already have; the poor do not desire what they are already lacking. Accordingly, human beings in aristocracy are, paradoxically, at once more miserable and happier. They are more miserable because of the inequality of condition in which they for the most part find themselves. But they are also happier because they believe this condition is permanent, which keeps them focused on the transcendent and thus on tending to their souls. They "do not think about the evils that they endure" and so happily endure them. Alternatively, one of the defining features of a democratic social-state is the passion for material well-being. The poor focus all of their energy on becoming rich, while the rich focus all of their energy on preserving their wealth. As a result, human beings in a democracy are, paradoxically, at once less miserable and less happy, more prosperous and more restless. They are less miserable because of the equality of condition in which they for the most part find themselves. But they are far less happy because they recognize their condition as being fluid or subject to change, which in turn keeps them focused on the material and thus tending to the state of their bodies. Consequently, they come to exhibit an immoderate desire for happiness in this world which not only convinces them that the state of their souls is ultimately dependent on the state of their bodies, but also (and for our purposes, more importantly)

that perfect happiness lies not in another world but in the *future*. They live by what Augustine calls the standard of the flesh and therefore believe that redemption lies in progress as opposed to in God's grace.

The modern idea of progress first emerges as a theme in Volume 2 of *Democracy in Americ*a in a chapter titled "How Equality Suggests to the Americans the Idea of Man's Indefinite Perfectibility." In *The Second Discourse,* Jean Jacques Rousseau (another one of those thinkers with who Tocqueville apparently lived a little every day) introduces the faculty of "perfectibility" (along with free will) as a faculty that separates human beings from animals and in this chapter, Tocqueville (presumably following Rousseau) does the same: "Although man resembles animals in several ways," he writes, "one feature is particular only to him alone: he perfects himself, and they do not perfect themselves."[389] Unlike Rousseau, however, Tocqueville discusses this faculty not so much to account for some kind of paradoxical relationship between mankind's historical development on the one hand and moral decline on the other, but rather, to demonstrate how democracy or, more specifically, "equality," has given it a "new character."[390]

It used to be that this idea had certain limits placed on it. As Tocqueville explains, "When citizens are classed according to rank, profession, birth, and when all are compelled to follow the path on which chance placed them, each man believes that near him he sees the furthest limits of human power, and no one tries any more to struggle against an inevitable destiny."[391] As a result, while they do not deny man's "ability to

[389] Rousseau, *The Second Discourse*, 72; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 760.
[390] Tocqueville, 760.
[391] Tocqueville, 760.

perfect himself," they do not regard the perfectibility of man as "indefinite" either. They "conceive of amelioration, not change" and they "imagine the condition of society becoming better, but not different."[392] In short, while they believe in a certain kind of progress, they do not believe in what Bury, as we saw in Chapter 2, defines as "the idea of Progress."[393] For as Tocqueville himself puts it, while "they like to persuade themselves that they have almost attained the degree of grandeur and knowledge that our imperfect nature entails," they "do not believe that they have reached the supreme good and the absolute truth (*what man or what people has been so foolish ever to imagine that?*)."[394] Their belief in progress is therefore "qualified," to quote Leo Strauss, "with a view to the fact that human nature does not change."[395] Because they will be what they are all their life, the human species, they readily conclude, will be at the end of a thousand years essentially if not apparently what it was at the beginning of that thousand.[396]

Democratic man, however, believes in precisely the opposite. For him, there are no limits to the idea of progress; human perfectibility, in his view, is indefinite. As equality takes root and "castes disappear, as classes come closer together" and everything becomes "tumultuously" mixed together, explains Tocqueville, "the image of an ideal and always fleeting perfection presents itself to the human mind."[397] Immersed in a world characterized by "continual change," democratic man sees only possibility, and hence

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[392] Tocqueville, 760.
[393] Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 1-20.
[394] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 760 (emphasis mine).
[395] Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, 235.
[396] Rousseau, *The Second Discourse*, 72.
[397] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 761.

readily concludes that "man, in general, is endowed with the indefinite ability to improve."[398] True, sometimes this change makes democratic man's "position worse," thereby leading him to conclude that "no nation or individual, no matter how enlightened, is ever infallible" and hence that "no one can claim to have discovered absolute good."[399] Sometimes this change has a sobering effect, reminding him of the precariousness of his station in life. However, when it "improves his lot," he becomes inflamed with hope and pursues "the absolute good without respite."[400] Democratic man forgets entirely about the precariousness of his station in life and comes to believe that the human species *will not* be at the end of a thousand years what it was at the beginning of that thousand. He comes to believe, writes Tocqueville, that mankind is inevitably headed towards an "ideal perfection," an "immense grandeur that he half sees vaguely at the end of the long course that humanity must still cover."[401]

Democratic man therefore exhibits a new kind of idealism that, paradoxically, finds its roots in the realism of Machiavelli and reaches its apex in the historical materialism of Marx.[402] This is an idealism that does not so much cause him to look

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[398] Tocqueville, 761.
[399] Tocqueville, 761.
[400] Tocqueville, 761.
[401] Tocqueville, 762.
[402] Compare Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, translated and edited by Nathan Tarcov and Harvey C. Mansfield (University of Chicago Press, 1996), II.29.3 with Karl Marx *Capital. Vol 1* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 177. As Machiavelli writes, "I indeed affirm it anew to be very true, according to what is seen through all the histories that men can second fortune but not oppose it, that they can weave its warp but not break it. *They should indeed never give up for, since they do not know its end and it proceeds by oblique and unknown ways, they have always to hope and, since they hope, not to give up in whatever fortune and in whatever travail they may find themselves*" (emphasis mine). Alternatively, as Marx writes, "Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and nature. *He opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces. . . . By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway*" (emphasis mine). To be sure, Machiavelli never goes so far as to claim that by acting on the external and changing it, man changes his own nature. Nevertheless, what connects these

upward towards heaven as it does *forward* towards the future. It is an idealism compatible with his predilection for materialism, utilitarianism, and empiricism because it is an idealism that collapses the City of God into the City of Man—the ideal into the real (more on this below). Indeed, as Tocqueville's single example of an American sailor illustrates, rather than exhibit an unexamined belief in heaven and the power of Providence, democratic man exhibits instead an unexamined belief in history and the power of progress.

According to Tocqueville, he "once met an American sailor," and asked him why "his country's ships are not built to last." "*Without hesitation*," writes Tocqueville, the sailor responded that because the art of navigation was making such rapid progress," it would be pointless to build a longer lasting craft. "The finest ship," he argued, "would soon be useless if its existence were prolonged for more than a few years."[403] As Stauffer observes, this example is "telling" for a number of reasons—not least of which is the sailor's concern for usefulness over beauty.[404] It also illustrates democratic man's confidence in scientific and technological progress and his belief that "the whole human race will inevitably advance and improve by these means."[405] He cannot explain exactly how or in what way, much less why. But given what he himself has witnessed, he is convinced that it will.

But alas, just as tending to the body will not save one's soul, the future—no matter how scientifically and technologically advanced—will not save mankind. That

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passages is not only the thought that man stands in opposition to nature, but also, that man has it within his capacity to transform it.

[403] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 762 (emphasis mine).

[404] Stauffer, "Tocqueville on the Modern Moral Situation: Democracy and the Decline of Devotion," 777.

[405] Stauffer, 777.

neither the former nor the latter are beyond *this world* means, in effect, that neither are capable of satisfying our most profound longings as human beings. Thus, just as democratic man finds himself restless in space—amidst his *material* well-being—so democratic man finds himself restless in time—amidst his *temporal* well-being. On the one hand, he believes that mankind is headed something, somewhere: towards some kind of ideal "perfection" or end point in history. On the other hand, however, he cannot imagine, much less see, what this "ideal perfection" consists in because it is an end-point that is "always fleeting." Upon reflection, therefore, democratic man's belief in progress is less philosophically coherent—and as a result, less a belief in *actual progress*—than meets the eye. For progress to *actually* qualify as progress it must entail movement towards an *actual* end. It must entail movement towards an *actual* "finest ship." According to Tocqueville's American sailor, however, there is no finest ship because there is no end to progress. What he believes is "progress" is, in reality, just endless, aimless, wandering. It is a belief in something that can only *further contribute to* his restlessness because it is upon reflection a belief in an immense grandeur at the end of a long course that, paradoxically, has no end.

## THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIC MAN: LIBERTY IN FAITH OR SERVITUDE IN REASON

From the foregoing, it should be clear that unlike either aristocratic or "re-animalized" man, democratic man finds himself in an awkward middle position. More of a brute than aristocratic man but less of a brute than man at the end of history, he is at once less serene than his predecessor *and* less content than his possible future self. His existential condition is therefore one of restlessness which means that, unlike either

aristocratic man or Kojeve's re-animalized man, he is *all the more* in need of God or religion. For as Tocqueville eventually argues, only religion will enable him to "from time to time" tear "himself away for a moment from the petty passions that agitate his life and from the transitory interests that fill it…" Only religion, will allow him to "enter suddenly into an ideal world where everything is great, pure, eternal."[406]

But again, what democratic man needs most is an altogether different question from what he is naturally disposed to embrace, on the one hand, and reject, on the other. According to Tocqueville, because "there is virtually no human action, no matter how particular we assume it to be, that does not originate in some general human conception of God, of his relations with the human race, of the nature of the human soul, and of man's duties towards his fellow," human beings have "an immense interest in developing very definite ideas about God, the soul, and their general duties toward their Creator and their fellow men."[407] Simply put, these ideas are of the utmost importance for human beings to develop and believe in; for without them, "everything they do" would be left to "chance," which would "in a sense condemn them to disorder and impotence."[408] Nevertheless, that which human beings have an immense interest in developing is precisely that which democratic man, given his self-negating tendency and corresponding restlessness is *least* likely to develop. As a human being, democratic man is for the most part already incapable of "breaking through to such necessary truths." This, writes Tocqueville, is a feat that only "truly emancipated" minds can accomplish.[409] Yet, as a

[406] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 955.
[407] Tocqueville, 743.
[408] Tocqueville, 743.
[409] Tocqueville, 744.

*democratic* human being, he is at an even greater disadvantage. Not only is he (like most other human beings) too preoccupied with his daily activities to do what only philosophers are naturally equipped to do, he is in addition the adherent of a philosophical method that, as evidenced above, fosters certain habits of mind that naturally encourage *the debunking* of very definite ideas about God, the soul, and man's duties towards his neighbors.

Of all types of men, therefore, democratic man is the most likely to suffer from a kind of paralyzing doubt with regard to God and religion that not only cripples the intellect, but in so doing, primes the soul for servitude. As Tocqueville explains:

> When religion is destroyed among a people, doubt takes hold of the highest portions of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others. Each person gets accustomed to having only confused and changing notions about the matters that most interest his fellows and himself. You defend your opinions badly or you abandon them, and, since you despair of being able, by yourself, to solve the greatest problems that human destiny presents, you are reduced like a coward to not thinking about them.
>
> Such a state cannot fail to enervate souls; it slackens the motivating forces of will and prepares citizens for servitude.
>
> When authority no longer exists in religious matter, any more than in political matters, men are soon frightened by the sight of this limitless independence. This perpetual agitation of all things disturbs and exhausts them. Since everything shifts in the intellectual world, they at least want everything to be firm and stable in the material order, and, no longer able to recapture their ancient beliefs, they give themselves a master.[410]

Here, Tocqueville provides a brief three-stage sketch of what happens when a democratic people's more Cartesian instincts come home to roost. First, doubt takes hold of the highest regions of the intellect in effect throwing them into a morass of moral confusion. Second, anxiety grips them. In the absence of any "self-evident" truths concerning God and the soul, they become agitated and afraid. Finally, a feeling of resignation sets in. Having become tired or fatigued, they readily conclude that living under a "Leviathan,"

[410] Tocqueville, 744–45.

so to speak, is a preferable fate to living in a condition of moral confusion and chaos. Unable to resume their "ancient beliefs" their souls relent; they readily embrace what is "firm and stable" and thus voluntarily forgo their freedom as a people.

Accordingly, in Tocqueville's view it is of paramount importance that religious belief somehow be made compatible with democracy. In fact, one might go so far as to say that the success of his entire political project hinges on whether this can be done.[411] "*For me*," he writes, "I doubt that man can ever bear complete religious independence and full political liberty at the same time; and I am led to think that, if he does not have faith, he must serve, and, if he is free, he must believe."[412] As the *only* thing that can truly provide what human beings have an immense interest in developing, religion comes into view as essential for the preservation of liberty and human dignity in a democratic age. It comes into view as essential for preserving what Tocqueville, by his own admission, cares for most.

Even so, what is of paramount importance is no small undertaking. Aside from the fact it is an undertaking that few people are qualified to take up, it is undertaking that is *exceptionally difficult* to execute. According to Tocqueville, religions should be modified in such a way as to make them appealing to the democratic mind. They should be modified in such a way as to "make use of democratic instincts"—just as religion in America, he argues, does. Specifically, this means making religion less orthodoxic and orthopraxic in character. It means making religion easier to understand, on the one hand,

[411] For an excellent discussion of the "essential relationship between democracy and religion" in *Democracy in America*, see J Judd Owen, *Making Religion Safe for Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 113–46.
[412] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 745.

and easier to practice, on the other.[413] As we saw at the end of Chapter 2, however, to modify a religion is a precarious task. If we recall, in his deleted chapter on religious eloquence, Tocqueville states that religions are by nature "immobile." "There is nothing so variable by their nature as religions and it cannot be otherwise," he writes. Their claim to rest on "absolute truth" depends on it.[414] To modify them, Tocqueville therefore admits, is to run the risk of giving the lie to their supposed absolute truth. It is to run the risk of destroying them and thus destroying precisely what democratic man needs most. And yet, given democratic man's psychological makeup, this is a risk that *must* be taken. The survival of political liberty depends on it. The only questions that remain, then, are these: will the few people who *are* qualified to modify religion rise to the occasion? And if not, what then? To what "master" will democratic man turn?

## THE ALLURE OF PANTHEISM

It is in the context of this dilemma that democratic man's propensity not only to give himself a "master," but also, embrace what might be called "ersatz religion" comes into view. At the beginning of Chapter 6 of Part 1, Volume 2, Tocqueville declares that "America is the most democratic country on earth, and at the same time the country where, according to trustworthy reports, the Catholic religion is making the most progress."[415] There are several reasons for this, one of which is simply the fact that those who regulate Catholicism in the United-States do precisely what Tocqueville recommends for all "who are charged" with regulating religions in democratic centuries.

[413] Tocqueville, 746–53.
[414] Tocqueville, 859.
[415] Tocqueville, 754.

In America, observes Tocqueville, "There are no Catholic priests who show less taste for small individual observances, extraordinary and particular methods of gaining your salvation, or who are attached more to the spirit of the law and less to its letter than the Catholic priests of the United States…"[416] Another more specific reason for the success of Catholicism in America, however, is that it has one powerful advantage over Protestantism: unity. "Two things must be clearly distinguished," explains Tocqueville. "Equality disposes men to want to judge by themselves; but from another side, it gives them the taste and the idea of a single social power, simple and same for all."[417] Catholicism therefore caters to the democratic instinct for unity in a way that Protestantism, which caters to the democratic instinct to judge for oneself, can never match. Catholicism provides "uniformity" thereby allowing democratic man to make a sort of uneasy compromise between his high and often quite exaggerated idea of human reason, on the one hand, and his corresponding very low opinion of revelation, on the other. After all, if religion or faith is to appear *reasonable,* it must present itself as a unified, coherent whole. Yet, as Tocqueville also makes clear, *even Catholicism* may not prove to be a religion that persists in democratic centuries. True, it has one thing going for it that Protestantism does not: unity. But as Tocqueville also readily admits, despite having a "taste for, and an idea of, a single social power that is both simple and the same for all," democratic man is on the whole less likely to do what human beings otherwise tend to do: "reconcile contrary principles" in order to "buy peace at the expense of

[416] Tocqueville, 753.
[417] Tocqueville, 754.

logic."[418] In Tocqueville's view, because there will be a much smaller number of people capable of achieving this reconciliation of opposing principles "in democratic centuries than in other centuries," human beings will "tend more and more to divide into only two parts, some leaving Christianity entirely, others going into the Roman Church"—some becoming Catholic, others turning elsewhere—just as the French, following the Revolution, themselves did.[419]

If we recall, immediately following the Revolution France entered into what might be called a "spiritual crisis." Rather than become a nation composed entirely of strong, rational, unbelievers, she became a nation composed instead of spiritually starved, weak individuals in search of solid ground. To be sure, some of these individuals returned to their "ancient beliefs." They embraced "the great summum of Catholicism, presented afresh by the traditionalists" including Bonald, Joseph de Maistre, the younger Lamennais, and Chateaubriand.[420] Many others, however, abandoned Christianity altogether and in the wake of experiencing a spiritual vacuum of the kind alluded to above, began to embrace seemingly secular alternatives. They began turn to "vast synthetic systems"—systems such as pantheism which, as Tocqueville proceeds to reveal, "will have a secret charm for men in democracy."[421]

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[418] Tocqueville, 755.
[419] Tocqueville, 756.
[420] Charlton, *Secular Religions in France*, 2.
[421] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 758. In his chapter on the "concentration of power" in democratic centuries, Tocqueville explains how "every central government adores uniformity" and in an editorial note, associates the idea of "uniformity" with both "Saint-Simonianism" and "pantheism." On the connection between Saint-Simonianism and pantheism, see John Tresch, T*he Romantic Machine: Utopian Science and Technology after Napoleon* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 194; and Warren Breckman, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 161-164.

Returning to the "democratic aptitude and taste for general ideas," Tocqueville tells us that "later" he will show how it manifests itself in politics; for now, he will call attention to "its principal effect on philosophy." "There is no denying that pantheism has made great progress in recent years," he begins. "Writings from a portion of Europe visibly bear its stamp. The Germans have introduced it into philosophy and the French into literature."[422] That they have, however, is no accident. As Tocqueville explains, "as conditions become more equal and each man in particular becomes more similar to all others, weaker and smaller ones stop looking at citizens and become accustomed to considering only the people; one forgets individuals and thinks only of the species."[423] Put another way, whereas in times of inequality one misses the forest for the trees, in times of equality one misses the trees for the forest; in finding humanity, one loses the individual.

It is important to recognize, however, that for the very same reason that Catholicism appeals to the democratic mind, so too does the philosophical doctrine of pantheism. The reason is as follows: in times of equality, the human mind is "keen to embrace a host of diverse objects simultaneously" and it "invariably aspires to associate a multitude of consequences with a single cause."[424] Furthermore, "because it becomes obsessed with the idea of unity, it looks for it everywhere."[425] However, as we have seen, democratic man wants to locate the "principal arbiter" of his beliefs within the limits of

[422] Tocqueville, 757.
[423] Tocqueville, 757.
[424] Tocqueville, 757.
[425] Peter Augustine Lawler, "Tocqueville on Pantheism, Materialism, and Catholicism," *Perspectives on Political Science* Vol. 30. No. 4 (Fall, 2001), 218. As Lawler explains, the democratic obsession with unity stems from the simple fact that democracy, like reason itself, "aims to abolish contradictions." Democracy "turns out to share reason's goal."

mankind alone. Therefore, Catholicism may well cease to facilitate and provide what democratic man invariably aspires to do and looks for everywhere. In other words, because the idea of a single Creator God may well cease to qualify as a believable "single cause" with which a multitude of consequences can be associated, Catholicism may well cease to qualify as a legitimate source of intellectual unity—something that Tocqueville all but affirms when he argues that even in the wake of discovering "in the world only one creation and one creator," democratic man will remain unsatisfied.[426] Accordingly, there is a real question as to whether Catholicism can fully satisfy the epistemological instincts and expectations of a man who, because he has a very high and exaggerated view of human reason has a corresponding very low opinion of revelation. In the event that he cannot "buy peace at the expense of logic," such a man may very well be inclined to look elsewhere. He may well turn to a philosophical doctrine or system that purports to deliver what from an epistemological perspective, Catholicism simply cannot provide.

Like Catholicism, pantheism not only caters to what democratic man "invariably" aspires to achieve, but also—or rather, in so doing—provides precisely what democratic man "looks for everywhere." Pantheism not only fulfills his aspiration to associate everything with "single cause" but as a result, provides him with the sense of intellectual unity that he so desires. Unlike Catholicism, however, pantheism does not insist on distinguishing the material from the immaterial, the natural from the supernatural, and therein lies its allure: rather than pit democratic man's indestructible spiritual longings against his predilection for materialism—rather than pit his "invincible distaste for the

[426] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 758.

supernatural" against his ineradicable love of the immortal and taste for the infinite—pantheism reconciles the former with the latter by collapsing the supernatural and the natural into a single whole.

For this reason, pantheism comes into view as an alternative and more attractive cure than positive religion for democratic man's restlessness, as discussed above. On the one hand, it validates democratic man's taste for material well-being and corresponding predilection for materialism, and thus assures him that his instincts with regard to the "supernatural" are fundamentally correct. On the other hand, however, it validates his indestructible longings for the immortal and the infinite because, rather than reject the idea of God outright, it simply *adjusts what is meant by Him*. It used to be that He was not us; that He was separate from His creation. According to pantheism, however, this view is fundamentally mistaken. In turns out that God *is* his creation. It turns out that He is we and we are Him—that He is "everything" and hence "everywhere." Consequently, pantheism operates according to the following paradox: that while everything is material, everything is also somehow more than matter—including especially the human being.[427] It at once denies *and affirms* the special status of human beings, and so allows human beings to think of themselves as angels all the while living like brutes. It enables them to live like Heliogabulas whilst claiming *to be* Saint Jerome.

Pantheism is therefore a "seductive lullaby," as Peter Augustine Lawler calls it, in that it is "much more compatible with democracy and modern science than Christianity."[428] As intimated above, despite being radically opposed to one another,

[427] Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, 35.
[428] Lawler, "Tocqueville on Pantheism, Materialism, and Catholicism," 223.

spiritualism and materialism share one thing in common: from the perspective of democratic man, they both demand *too much*. Whereas the former demands too much in the way of belief and thus flies in the face of how he generally perceives and interprets the world around him, the latter demands too much in the way of unbelief and thus flies in the face of what democratic man cannot help but long for as a human being. As we have seen, however, because pantheism claims to accommodate *both*, it in effect demands *neither*. It promises a kind of satisfaction that neither spiritualism nor materialism on their own can provide, making it much more psychologically appealing.

Of course, whether pantheism *actually* accomplishes what it purports to accomplish is another question. For our purposes, however, it is important simply to note the following: that regardless of how philosophically coherent or incoherent, how true or untrue it is, pantheism appeals to democratic man in a way that neither spiritualism nor materialism do. Unlike spiritualism, pantheism does not require or encourage democratic man to relinquish his very high and exaggerated view of human reason; unlike materialism, it does not require that he reduce his spiritual longings to delusion. It is for this reason that, according to Tocqueville pantheism feeds his "intellectual pride" and flatters his "intellectual sloth." Too proud to be a believer yet too lazy to be an unbeliever, pantheism allows him to be both without having to be, strictly speaking, either.

And yet, as we shall see next, pantheism is not the only philosophical doctrine or "ersatz religion" that, given his psychological makeup and corresponding restlessness, democratic man is liable to find alluring. For what pantheism does for democratic man in the context of his being in "space"—rendering all that is matter, more than just matter—

democratic history does for him in the context of his being in "time"—rendering all that is history, *more than just history*.

## THE ALLURE OF DEMOCRATIC HISTORY

As previously discussed, whereas for Kojève "man properly so-called" exists only in time and is therefore "nothing," for Tocqueville man exists in both space *and* time and is therefore something, not simply "becoming." Consequently, despite being "in a very real sense" a "new man," democratic man is *still a human being* and so continues to exhibit the same love for the immortal and taste for the infinite that all human beings exhibit, regardless of time or place. Despite the newness of his mores, these "sublime instincts" remain, meaning that despite the newness of his predilections he will continue to long for some kind of spiritual satisfaction, despite his Cartesian way of thinking. This is especially true given the fact that democratic man, unlike his aristocratic predecessor, lives in a world or time where restlessness, not contentedness, reigns.

And yet, *precisely because* democratic man exists in both space and time, this spiritual satisfaction will not be found by turning to pantheism alone—no matter how much more charming than either materialism or spiritualism it might initially seem. No, as Tocqueville reveals in his chapter on poetry in democratic centuries, because democratic man has immoderate expectations for happiness in this world, divinizing the material—collapsing the supernatural into the natural—will not suffice. In order to *truly* satisfy his spiritual longings and calm his restlessness, he will also have to divinize history; he will also have to collapse the supernatural into time; for only *then* will everything truly become a "single whole."

As we have seen, when compared to aristocratic man, democratic man neither desires nor appreciates what poetry portrays and offers. Because he naturally seeks to push aside anything that stands between him and the "the truth"—because he is accustomed to trusting only in what he himself can verify—he prefers "the real" to "the ideal," the useful to the beautiful. In effect, just as he altogether less spiritual that he is materialistic, he is altogether less poetic than he is prosaic. Again, he is naturally disposed to look down, not up, and by offering a "higher image to the mind," poetry, like spiritualism, appeals to those who are disposed to do the latter, not the former. At the same time, however, just as none of this is to say that he has no spiritual longings, none of this is to say that he has no idealism, either. For as we have also seen, despite his psychological make-up, he nevertheless retains a love of the immortal and taste for the infinite, on the one hand, and nevertheless remains somewhat open to the ideal, on the other. He just imagines the ideal in a fundamentally different way.

In aristocratic centuries, explains Tocqueville, poetry is "populated with supernatural powers" that, instead of being discovered via "the senses," are discovered instead "by the mind."[429] Why? Because by keeping society from changing, aristocracy favors the "steadiness and duration of positive religions…"[430] It keeps the mind's eye looking upward towards heaven as much as it keeps man's body in place on earth. In addition to being populated with supernatural beings, however, aristocratic poetry is populated with heroes or great men—certain "privileged individuals" who, like God

[429] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 833.
[430] Tocqueville, 833.

himself, exist "above and beyond the human condition."[431] According to Tocqueville, because the most people who live in aristocracy never see these men up "close, " they never cut through to the empirical truth about who they are, what they do, and how much power they actually wield. In effect, these "privileged individuals" are liable to be depicted in a poetic rather than in a realistic way. Shrouded in obscurity, they are liable to be depicted as more powerful, more distinguished, and more influential than they actually are. [432]

In democratic centuries, by contrast, poetry is devoid of the supernatural because for the democratic poet, that which cannot be apprehended by the senses—that which is not empirically verifiable—most likely does not exist. Democratic man's "doubt" regarding that which might otherwise be discovered by the mind alone has the effect of pulling his imagination "back down to earth," confining him to the natural—to the "visible and real world."[433] Nor is poetry in democratic centuries filled with heroes because where equality reigns, "men are all very small and very similar..."[434] As a result, "poets who live in democratic centuries cannot ever take one man in particular as the subject of their portrait" as they can in aristocratic centuries. Because no one enjoys an existence that is in a sense "outside of the human condition," no one stands out as worthy of being depicted as more than merely human. All are equally worthy.[435]

Unlike aristocratic poets, therefore, democratic poets depict neither gods nor heroes but nature or space. As Tocqueville explains, "When doubt depopulated heaven

[431] Tocqueville, 834.
[432] Tocqueville, 834.
[433] Tocqueville, 834.
[434] Tocqueville, 834.
[435] Tocqueville, 834.

and when the progress of equality reduced each man to better known and smaller proportions, poets, not yet imagining what they could put in place of these great subjects that withdrew with aristocracy, turned their eyes to inanimate nature."[436] Upon losing sight of gods and heroes, they turned instead to "rivers and mountains."[437] They turned away from the supernatural and towards the natural and in so doing began to idealize space—just as pantheism divinizes the material.

However, as Tocqueville goes on to explain, the idealization of space or nature, like the divinization of the material, has a 'best before' date:

> Some have thought that this embellished portrayal of the material and inanimate things which cover the earth was poetry appropriate to democratic centuries; but I think that is a mistake. I believe that it only represents a period of transition.
>
> I am persuaded that in the long run democracy diverts the imagination from everything that is external to man, in order to fix it only on man.
>
> Democratic peoples can be very amused for a moment by considering nature; but they get really excited only by the sight of themselves. Here alone are the natural sources of poetry to be found among these peoples, and it may be believed that all poets who do not want to draw upon these sources will lose all sway over the souls of those whom they claim to charm, and will end by no longer having anything except cold witnesses to their transports.[438]

In this passage Tocqueville qualifies his previous argument that instead of depicting gods and heroes, democratic poets will depict inanimate nature or space. As it turns out, their depicting inanimate nature "represents" only a transition period. Because democratic peoples are less attracted to inanimate nature than they are to their animate selves, they will eventually become unmoved by poetry that idealizes or embellishes the former. This kind of poetry, Tocqueville reveals, will eventually "lose sway" over its audience. It will in the long run cease to capture the democratic imagination.

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[436] Tocqueville, 835.
[437] Tocqueville, 835.
[438] Tocqueville, 835.

Consequently, democratic poets will in the long run need to find another muse. They will need to depict what *does* capture the democratic imagination: man understood as a 'being' that is not only separate from but *opposed to* inanimate nature. While there are "some in Europe," writes Tocqueville, who remain enamored with the American wilderness, Americans themselves are indifferent to it. They pay attention to nature only insofar as it stands in their way—that is, as something to be domesticated or "subdued." In other words, Americans pay attention to inanimate nature only insofar as presents itself as an object to be *conquered* by animate man. In fact, their entire conception of courage, as Tocqueville later reveals, is predicated on man's ability to do just this: "In the United States," he writes, "warrior valor is little prized; the courage that is known the best and esteemed the most is the one that makes you face the furies of the Ocean in order to arrive earliest in port" and "bear without complaint the miseries of the wilderness…"[439] In order to charm democratic peoples, therefore, democratic poets will need to idealize this 'American' opposition to nature. They will need to idealize what constitutes democratic man's belief in the idea of progress in the first place: his belief in man's "indefinite perfectibility."[440]

As alluded to above, democratic man's belief in the idea of progress is idealistic one that, paradoxically, finds its roots in the realism of Machiavelli.[441] If we recall from the Introduction, in Chapter 15 of the *Prince*, Machiavelli rejects the idealism of the ancients by famously declaring that unlike them, he will go "directly to the effectual truth

[439] Tocqueville, 1104–5.
[440] Tocqueville, 836.
[441] See, for instance, Harvey Mansfield, "Machiavelli and the Idea of Progress," in *History and the Idea of Progress,* eds. Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman (Cornell University Press, 1995), 61-74.

of a thing" as opposed to "the imagination of it."[442] But his rejection of ancient and Christian idealism, of the "imagination of a thing," is nevertheless coupled with the promotion of an idealism of his own—one *rooted in* the effectual truth—that ultimately reaches its apex in Marx.[443] This is an idealism which, metaphorically speaking, places the power of God in the hands of man; for it is an idealism which ultimately posits that man can or*, at the very least ought to try*, to "hold down," "strike," and "beat" God's creation (what Machiavelli calls fortune but nevertheless likens to something quite natural) into submission.[444] It is an idealism that, rather than quell or temper democratic man's passion for material well-being inflames that passion because it is an idealism which grants him the ability to provide for himself, *here in this world*, what he would otherwise have to wait for in the next.[445] In other words, it is an idealism that encourages him to put his faith not in the prospect of being saved by the "unmerited" grace of God, but in the indefinite perfectibility of mankind. It is an idealism that encourages him to place his faith in the modern "doctrine of progress," not the orthodox "doctrine of Providence."[446]

Accordingly, this is an idealism that is actually compatible with democratic man's preference for the material, utilitarian, and empirical, because it is an idealism that, given all of progress that *he himself has witnessed*, warrants his dreaming not about the next

[442] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 61.
[443] Newell, *Tyranny: A New Interpretation*, 71. As Newell puts it, "The radical opposition Machiavelli posits between the prince's virtues – meaning his strength of will – and the hostility of Fortune also anticipates that aspect of Hegel's philosophy according to which striving against the necessity of nature establishes our freedom."
[444] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 101. Here, Machiavelli likens fortune to a "river" that can be "dammed."
[445] See Machiavelli's rejection of the importance of the next world…
[446] Augustine, *City of God*, 581.

world but about the future of *this one*. Aristocracy, explains Tocqueville, has a way of focusing the mind on the "past" and "fixes" it there.[447] It has a way of focusing the mind on what *was* or *has been* as opposed to what *might* or *will be*. Again, because life in aristocracy is static, aristocratic peoples remain closed off to the modern idea of progress. They do not spend their days dreaming about the future because their future is their present which is also their past. They do not so much live in "time" as they do in "space." Their 'being' in "time" is for the most part overshadowed by the fact of their immobility in space, which keeps them focused on looking up as opposed to looking forward. Democratic peoples, however, live more so in "time" than they do in "space" because democracy has a way of focusing the mind not on *what is* or *has been*, but on *what might* or *may be*. Because life in democracy in fluid, it has a way of "suggesting" to the democratic mind that mankind is headed towards an "ideal perfection" *in* the less than perfect real—a City of God *in the future of* the fallen City of Man. Hence the future, writes Tocqueville, "offers as a vast opening to poets and allows them to move their portrayal far away from what is seen."[448]

And yet, as also mentioned above, democratic man's belief progress amounts to an idealism that, unlike the idealism of the ancients does not so much relieve as it does *exacerbate* his restlessness. If we recall, although democratic man believes that mankind is headed towards some kind of "ideal perfection"—some end-point in history—he cannot imagine, much less see, what this "ideal perfection" consists in. It is an end-point that is "always fleeting" because in his view, there is no end to progress. Upon closer

[447] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 834.
[448] Tocqueville, 836.

examination, therefore, democratic man's belief in progress comes into view as a belief in endless wandering—a belief in something that does not actually exist and will never be strictly speaking "real," and thus that will never *truly* satisfy his "immoderate desire for happiness in this world." Upon closer examination, democratic man's belief in progress is a belief in mankind's heading towards nothing, nowhere.

In turning from the depiction of inanimate nature to writing about what *does* capture the democratic imagination, then, it will become the task of democratic poets to give form and substance to this nothing, nowhere—that is, to depict it as something, somewhere.[449] Put another way, it will become to the task of democratic poets to depict the "ideal perfection" and "immense grandeur" that on his own, democratic man can see only "vaguely at the end of the long course that humanity must still cover." As Tocqueville explains:

> If in democratic centuries faith in positive religions is often shaky and beliefs in intermediary powers, whatever name you give them, grow dim, men on the other hand are disposed to conceive a much more vast idea of Divinity itself, and the intervention of the divine in human affairs appears to them in a new and greater light.
>
> *Seeing the human species as a single whole, they easily imagine that the same design rules over its destinies, and in the actions of each individual, they are led to recognize the mark of this general and constant plan by which God leads the species*.
>
> This can also be considered as a very abundant source of poetry that opens in these centuries.
>
> Democratic poets will always seem small and cold if they try to give bodily forms to gods, demons or angels, and try to make them descend from heaven to quarrel over the earth.
>
> But, if democratic poets want to connect the great events that they are relating to the general designs of God for the universe, and, without showing the hand of the sovereign master, cause his thought to be entered into, they will be admired and understood, for the imagination of their com- patriots itself follows this road.[450]

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[449] Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, 57. As Lawler observes, for the democratic poet "human endeavor must be more than the endless movement away from nature. It must have some more positive human significance…The democratic poet ennobles human 'striving' as the aiming 'toward that immense greatness glimpsed indistinctly at the end of a long track human must follow.'"

[450] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 838–39 (emphasis mine).

This passage is noteworthy for a number of reasons, the first of which is the seemingly contradictory logic underlying what Tocqueville prophesizes. As he presents it, the appearance of grand poetic narratives about the destiny of mankind (of its meaningful journey towards some "ideal perfection") somehow correlates with the *weakening*, not the *strengthening*, of religious belief. "*If*" faith in positive religions often becomes shaky, he explains, "*then*" democratic man will conceive a far vaster idea of Divinity and see its intervention in human affairs in a "new and greater light." This brings us to a second reason why this passage is noteworthy. If conceiving of a far vaster idea of Divinity and its intervention in human affairs is contingent upon democratic man *losing*, not *retaining*, his religion, then Divinity's appearing to him in a "new and greater light" must somehow correspond with his very high and often exaggerated idea human reason and distaste for the supernatural as opposed to any orthodox belief in the "doctrine of Providence" as inaugurated by Augustine. It must mean appearing to him in a way that is, at least to a certain extent, empirically verifiable (through actual events and actions)—which brings us to a third. and final reason why this passage is noteworthy. What Tocqueville is essentially saying here is that it will eventually become the task of democratic poets to write what he later identifies as democratic history—a type of history that as we have seen, although Christian by derivation is anti-Christian by consequence and that, as such, promises to do for democratic man's 'being' in "time" what pantheism does for his 'being' in "space."

Let us recall that the reason why pantheism will hold a secret charm for men in democracy is because it satisfies or, at the very least, *holds out the promise* of satisfying the epistemological biases of a being who, despite his very high and often exaggerated

idea of human reason, is liable to nevertheless find materialism as unsatisfying as spiritualism. That democratic man cannot destroy his love for the immortal and taste for the infinite means, in effect, that he will continue to have spiritual longings that materialism—by virtue of its being materialism—simply cannot acknowledge as being anything more than the by-product of an irrational fear "of things invisible."[451] Democratic man is therefore liable to turn to pantheism as an attractive alternative to "positive religion" because, while it does not reduce his spiritual longings to delusion, it also does not demand that he let go of his distaste for the supernatural and low opinion of revelation, either. Pantheism holds out the promise of being able to heal the tension between his predilection for materialism, on the one hand, and his indestructible spiritual longings, on the other. It holds out the promise of being able to cure his restlessness in "space," amidst his material well-being.

Something similar, however, can be said of democratic history—albeit with respect to "time" as opposed to "space." As with pantheism, democratic history not only caters to what democratic man "invariably" aspires to do, but also—or rather, in so doing—provides precisely what democratic man "looks for everywhere." It not only fulfills his aspiration to associate everything, all historical events and individual actions, with "single cause" (a "superior force" as Tocqueville calls it in his chapter on historians in democratic centuries) but as a result, also provides him with the sense of intellectual unity that he so desires. Moreover, just as pantheism does not insist on distinguishing the material from the immaterial, democratic history does not insist on distinguishing the real

[451] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 63.

from the ideal. Hence, rather than pit democratic man's new-found idealism against his preference for the real—rather than pit his belief in indefinite progress against his predilection for empiricism and utilitarianism—democratic history reconciles the former with the latter by collapsing the ideal into the real or rather, by employing the real (history) in the service of an ideal (progress). Democratic history thus holds out the promise of being able to reconcile the tension between democratic man's preference for the real, on the one hand, with his new-found idealism, on the other. It attaches meaning or purpose to his existence in time just as pantheism attaches meaning to his existence in space because just as the latter renders all that is matter more than just matter, democratic history renders all that is history *more than just history*.

## THE "STRANGE" PERSISTENCE OF DEMOCRATIC HISTORY RECONSIDERED

In his essay "Progress and Return," Leo Strauss diagnoses what he calls the "contemporary crisis of Western civilization"—a crisis that, as he later reveals, "may be said to be identical with the climactic crisis of the idea of progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term."[452] What is the idea of progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term? According to Strauss, it consists in the following set of beliefs: that "the development of human thought as a whole is a progressive development"; that there is a "fundamental and necessary parallelism between intellectual and social progress"; that "there are no assignable limits to intellectual and social progress"; that "infinite intellectual and social progress is actually possible"; and finally, that "once mankind has

[452] Leo Strauss, "Progress and Return: The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization," *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (May, 1981), 27.

reached a certain stage of development, there exists a solid floor beneath which man can no longer sink."[453] Simply put, the idea of progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term is the idea of the indefinite perfectibility of man as discussed by Tocqueville in Volume 2 of *Democracy in America*. It is an idea that democratic peoples, given their all too Christian "hope" for the future, are naturally liable to embrace and thus an idea that democratic poets turned historians are naturally liable to write about.

Still, according to Strauss faith in the idea of progress the full and emphatic sense is fading. As he earlier notes, "The term 'progress' in its full and emphatic meaning has practically disappeared from serious literature. People speak less and less of 'progress' and more and more of 'change.' They no longer claim to know that we are moving in the right direction."[454] One reason for the decline of faith in the modern idea of progress, he observes, is simply the "incredible barbarization which we have been so unfortunate as to witness in our century." Above all, it is events like the Holocaust which seem to have exposed the idea of progress for what it is: an idea "based on wholly unwarranted hopes."[455] Nevertheless, as Strauss goes on to argue, even the incredible barbarization which we have been so unfortunate as to witness in our century does not fully account for the decline in this faith. No, there is another much more profound reason why people no longer claim to know that we are moving the right direction: the replacement of "the old distinction of good and bad, good and evil" with the new distinction of "progressive and reactionary."[456]

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[453] Strauss, 24.
[454] Strauss, 23.
[455] Strauss, 29.
[456] Strauss, 30.

To be sure, the replacement of the old distinction of "good and bad, good and evil" with the new distinction of "progressive and reactionary" may seem inconsequential—that is, at least insofar as 'progressive' is typically conceived of as a stand in for what is 'good' and reactionary a stand in for what is 'bad' or 'evil.' However, as Strauss explains, progressive and reactionary are categories bereft of any moral meaning. At the end of the day, all they represent is change in one direction versus another which, from a purely normative perspective, amounts to rudderless, aimless, wandering—just like democratic man's belief in indefinite progress.[457] Accordingly, the replacement of the old distinction of good and evil with the new distinction of progressive and reactionary amounts, in actuality, to the replacement of faith in something with faith in nothing. It amounts to the embrace of nihilism and is therefore ultimately what accounts for the climatic crisis of the idea of progress and therewith it, the "contemporary crisis of Western civilization."

And yet, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, although faith in the idea of progress has no doubt fluctuated over the past two centuries, it has not simply gone away. People may, from time to time, speak less of progress and more of change. But even when speaking of the latter they cannot, it seems, help but at the same time appeal to "hope."[458] The fact is that because there is no real prospect for a "return" (that is, at least insofar as by "return" is meant a restoring faith in "positive religion"), this faith in

[457] Strauss, 27. As Strauss puts it, "No simple, inflexible, eternal distinction between good and bad could give assurance to those who had learned to take their bearings only by the distinction between progressive and reactionary."
[458] See Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (Crown Publishers, 2006), 322.

progress persists and, since the collapse of communism in the 1980s has arguably taken on a new, invigorated form.[459]

In his book *Liberal Democracy and Political Science*, James Ceaser explains why until recently, liberal democratic leaders have for the most part eschewed "theories of historical inevitability."[460] According to him, "because fascism and communism were based on ideas of historical inevitability, liberal democracy more easily defined itself against historicism…"[461] To be sure, it too had a "sustaining faith in the idea of progress, but this was quite distinct from fatalistic doctrines of inevitability."[462] Then came the sudden of collapse of communism—an event which, as Ceaser explains, far from discrediting historicism (as one might expect), had the unanticipated consequence of somehow strengthening it. "How curious," he writes…

> …that this same mode of thought should appear in the argument on behalf of liberal democracy. Frank Fukuyama, in the article "The End of History?" is the one of the first serious thinkers to attach the idea of historical inevitability to liberal democracy. The great attention his thesis received, both in academia and the popular press, suggests the attraction his new historicism holds for intellectuals in liberal democracies. [463]

What, exactly, accounts for this attraction? Unfortunately, Ceaser does not speculate. Just as Brett Bowden stops short at calling the persistence of universal history "strange," so Ceaser stops short at calling the appearance Fukuyama's inevitability thesis "curious." However, given what Tocqueville brings to light concerning the psychological make-up and corresponding existential fate of democratic man, this attraction is upon reflection

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[459] For a discussion of what Strauss did and did not mean by "return," see Catherine Zuckert, "Strauss's Return to Pre-Modern Thought" in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, edited by Steven B. Smith (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 93-118.
[460] James Ceaser, *Liberal Democracy and Political Science* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 174.
[461] Ceaser, 174.
[462] Ceaser, 174
[463] Ceaser, 174.

less strange and less curious than it appears. In accordance with that make-up and corresponding fate, this attraction speaks to democratic man's search for ersatz alternatives to a "positive religion" (Christianity) he no longer really believes in. Simply put, this attraction speaks to his desire to overcome his restlessness and find meaning in a world where God is dead.

When this persistent desire is taken into account, therefore, the persistence of democratic history can hardly be called "strange." The fact is that in societies where individual reason reins and "doubt has depopulated heaven," human beings will nonetheless turn to and seek out other, less overtly theological, sources of meaning—one of which is history. As we have seen, lest they suffer from restless wandering in perpetuity, they will turn to "vast synthetic systems" or "alternative spiritualities" that, for reasons noted above, are arguably *even more* compatible with their democratic instincts than positive religion. After all, as Tocqueville reminds us, "*The soul has needs that must be satisfied*; and whatever care you take to distract it from itself, it soon grows bored, restless and agitated amid the enjoyments of the senses."[464] The question, then, is not so much whether these needs will be satisfied, but how? According to Tocqueville, "some men" will satisfy their spiritual longings by rejecting the enjoyments of the senses altogether—by "throwing themselves frantically into the world of spirits."[465] They will, on account of a "prodigious reaction" to materialism, "look only to heaven" and take up the life of St. Jerome (something that, as we will see in the next chapter, has a secular

[464] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 940 (emphasis mine).
[465] Tocqueville, 940.

equivalent).[466] But what about the vast majority of others? To what will they turn? As I have argued in this chapter, one answer is that they will eventually turn to democratic history which, precisely because it is a derivation of Christian world history, comes into view as being especially alluring to the democratic imagination—an imagination which already "follows this road." No, it is not overtly theological. On the contrary, it claims to be scientific and secular. Nevertheless, because it caters to democratic man's idealism, democratic history comes into view as a surrogate for positive religion. It implicitly attaches meaning to his otherwise meaningless existence in "time" just as pantheism attaches meaning to his otherwise meaningless existence in "space"—and as we shall see next, to the detriment of his well-being in both.

[466] Tocqueville, 940.

# Chapter 4: The Danger of Democratic History: Voegelin, Tocqueville, Gobineau, and the "Gnostic Attitude" of Democratic Historians

*I rehearsed in my mind the history of the past sixty years and smiled bitterly at the illusions we nursed at the end of each phase of our long revolution; at the theories that thrived on those illusions; at the learned daydreams of our historians; and at the many ingenious but erroneous systems with which we attempted to explain a present that we still perceived only dimly and to predict a future that we could not perceive at all.*[467]

-Tocqueville, *Recollections*

As discussed in Chapter 2, in a famous letter addressed to the German economist, Walther Borgius, Friedrich Engels identifies Tocqueville's democratic historians (The Restoration Liberals) as being instrumental in the development of the Marxist conception of history. "If it was Marx who discovered the materialist view of history," he writes, "the work of Thierry, Mignet, [and] Guizot…goes to show that efforts were being made in that direction…"[468] Not discussed, however, was the actual content of that letter, which consists of Engels answering two important questions related to the Marxist conception of history.

The first question asks about the extent to which, within this conception, "economic relations" are "causally effective"—to which Engels replies that because such relations are "the determinant upon which the history of society is based," they are not only causally effective, but also, causally definitive.[469] Everything from the "manner in which men of a certain society produce the necessities of life," to the manner in which those necessities are exchanged; from the "distribution of products," to the "dissolution

[467] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 47.
[468] Engels to W. Borgius, January 25, 1894, *Marx and Engels: Collected Works Vol. 50: Letters from 1892-1895*, 264.
[469] Engels, 264-265 (emphasis mine).

of gentile society"; from the "division of classes," to the "relations of rules and subjects, and hence the state, politics, [and] the law…," he tells Borgius, is ultimately determined by such relations.[470] They are, so to speak, the motor of history—the "superior force" or gravitational law governing the progressive development of mankind over time. They are that which "*in the final analysis,* determines historical development."[471]

The second question therefore takes the form of an important follow-up: if this is the case—if economic relations are what "in the final analysis, determines historical development"—then to what extent are individuals and, in particular, "great men" active participants in determining their own political fate? According to Engels, the answer to this question is more complicated but it essentially comes down to the following: while it is true that men "make their own history" they nevertheless do so in a pre-determined or, to use more theological language, foreordained way. They operate, he writes…

> …in a given environment by which they are conditioned, and on the basis of extant and actual relations of which economic relations, no matter how much they may be influenced by others of a political and ideological nature, are ultimately the determining factor and represent the unbroken thread which alone can lead to comprehension."[472]

Here, Engels clarifies an argument initially advanced by Marx at the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonarparte*. Immediately after expressing his disagreement with Hegel who "remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice," Marx writes the following: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances,

[470] Engels, 265.
[471] Engels, 265 (emphasis mine).
[472] Engels, 266.

but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."[473] To be sure, what Marx here posits *seems* self-evident: *of course* men "do not make history as they please." That they cannot change the past means that whether they recognize it or not, the future is not as open-ended as they might perceive or wish it to be. In light of what Engels writes above, however, what seems self-evident is not *actually* what Marx is saying. What Marx is saying, rather, is that whatever history men do happen to make, they make as a result of and in keeping with how history—understood as an unbroken comprehensible thread—has, paradoxically, *already made them*.[474] What Marx is saying, according to Engels, is that men make what history *compels* them to make, whether they realize it or not.[475]

So it follows that while the emergence in history of certain great men *in particular*—of Napoleon or Caesar—is a function of "chance," the emergence in history of great men *in general*—of *a* Napoleon or *a* Caesar—is not. Rather, their emergence is as necessitated as everything else. "That Napoleon, this particular Corsican, was the military dictator rendered necessary by a French Republic bled white by her wars, was fortuitous," writes Engels. However, "in the absence of a Napoleon*, someone else would*

[473] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" in the *Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert C. Tucker (Norton, 1978), 594-595.
[474] See also Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker (Norton, 1978), 4. In the preface to this work, Marx writes the following: "In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."
[475] Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 595. In characterizing the role that not only "the heroes," but also, "the parties and the masses" played in bringing about the French Revolution, Marx writes that collectively, they "performed the task of their time."

*have taken his place*," and this is "proved by the fact that when *someone becomes necessary*—Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell, etc.—*he invariable turns up*."[476] Simply put, the emergence of great men in history is, in Engels and Marx's view, like the emergence of a flood in nature. Some floods are more destructive than others, and in this they vary. That all floods, however, are "in the final analysis" necessitated—that is, *are naturally occurring phenomena*—means that none are strictly speaking, accidental. Rather, they occur for entirely natural and thus *predictable* reasons.

In keeping with Tocqueville's democratic historians, then, Engels and Marx essentially eliminate the phenomenon of accident from history. For them as for Mignet, Thierry, and Guizot, what *appears* accidental is always, upon closer inspection, necessitated or "superstructural;" for as Engels later writes:

> The further removed is the sphere we happen to be investigating from the economic sphere and the closer to the purely abstract, ideological sphere, the more likely shall we be to find evidence of the fortuitous in its development, and the more irregular will be the curve it describes. *But if you draw the mean axis of the curve*, you will find that the longer the period under consideration and the larger the area thus surveyed, the more approximately parallel will this axis be to the axis of economic development.[477]

In this passage Engels explains the nature of the relationship between what in Marxist theory is called the "substructure" and the "superstructure"—the "economic" and "ideological" spheres of society, respectively. According to Engels, when the sphere under investigation (philosophy or the law, for instance) is far removed from the substructure or economic sphere, evidence of the "fortuitous" or accidental in its development is more likely to present itself. For, when the sphere under investigation is

[476] Engels to W. Borgius, January 25, 1894, *Marx and Engels: Collected Works Vol. 50: Letters from 1892-1895*, 266 (emphasis mine).
[477] Engels, 266-267.

far removed from the substructure, the inextricable connection between the two becomes obfuscated and thus much more difficult to discern. *If*, however, this sphere is nevertheless investigated *in the context of* the substructure—that is, if it is analyzed in the context of long-term trends in "economic development"—then what might otherwise present itself as evidence of the fortuitous in its development comes into focus instead as being itself necessitated: a product of the very economic relations that "in the final analysis" determines historical development to begin with.

Consequently, in concluding his letter to Borgius, Engels makes an argument initially advanced by Immanuel Kant: that while men have hitherto failed to make history "with a concerted will in accordance with a concerted plan," a "necessity" still reigns which makes it so their diverse and otherwise contradictory "aspirations" contribute to the execution of concerted plan, nonetheless. At the very beginning of his *Idea for Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, Kant argues that "since men neither pursue their aims purely by instinct, as the animals do, nor act in accordance with any integral, prearranged plan like rational cosmopolitans, it would appear that no law-governed history of mankind is possible." But as he proceeds to explain, what appears impossible is just that: an appearance. Men *do*, in fact, act in accordance with such a plan. "They are unconsciously promoting an end which, even if they knew what it was, would scarcely arouse their interest."[478]

Of course, unlike Marx and Engels, Kant never goes so far as to work out the details of such a plan (his aim—at least as he relates it here—is merely to prove that such

[478] Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," *Kant: Political Writings*, 41.

a plan is possible).[479] Nevertheless, he does express his confidence that, in time, someone will take it upon themselves to work out what is "prearranged." For just as "nature produced a Kepler who found an unexpected means of reducing the eccentric orbits of the planets to definite laws," he writes, so she produced a "Newton who explained these laws in terms of a universal natural cause."[480] The same, he therefore predicts, will eventually occur in the realm of history, as well.

Now, Tocqueville was unacquainted with—because he died well before—what Engels, in his letter to Borgius, reveals concerning the causally definitive status of economic relations and connected to it, the predetermined role that individuals play in shaping history. Even so, in what follows I will show why it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that what Engels elucidates in this letter qualifies as a perfect example of what Tocqueville diagnoses as the *danger* of democratic history: namely, its tendency to "undermine the fundamental condition for the perpetuation of liberal democracy—the human being's belief in his ability to control his own fate."[481]

To begin, I consult Eric Voegelin's *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*—a work in which he diagnoses what he calls the "gnostic attitude" of modern intellectuals. According to Voegelin, this attitude consists of six characteristics that, in one variation or another, can be found in "gnostic mass movements" or "ersatz religions" including (but not limited to) "progressivism, positivism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, communism, fascism, and national socialism." As I argue below, however, it is also an attitude that,

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[479] See *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, which can arguably be read as the very plan that Kant refers to in his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*.
[480] Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," *Kant: Political Writings*, 42.
[481] Catherine Zuckert, "Political Sociology Versus Speculative Philosophy," 123. See also Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 857.

coincidentally enough, more or less captures the psychology and corresponding intellectual hubris of democratic historians for whom "showing how facts happened," according to Tocqueville, is "not enough."

From there, I turn to Tocqueville's correspondence with Arthur de Gobineau. With a few exceptions, this correspondence is typically read as an exchange between friends over the enduring relevance of religion in modernity, the nature of modern politics, or the concept of race.[482] As I present it, however, it can also be read as a less than friendly—and ultimately fruitless—debate between Tocqueville and a democratic historian who, precisely because of his gnostic attitude and corresponding intellectual hubris, is convinced that he and he *alone* has discovered the "master-key" to interpreting all of social and political reality.

Finally, I discuss the "practical consequences" of this intellectual hubris. More specifically, I show how by creating absolute historical systems that, as Tocqueville describes them, are "false beneath the air of their mathematical truth," democratic historians (whether on the political Left or the political Right) ultimately distort how human beings perceive themselves as political actors in world—and in fundamentally dangerous ways. For as we shall see, by teaching their readers that they are not so much autonomous, self-legislating ends in themselves as they are either the collateral damage or dispensable means, decelerants or accelerants, of a historical process beyond their control, such historians inadvertently encourage their readers to adopt one of two forms

[482] See, for instance, Doris Goldstein, *Trial of Faith: Religion and Politics in Tocqueville's Thought* (Elsevier Scientific Publishing. Co., 1975); Larry Siedentop, *Tocqueville* (Oxford University Press, 1994); Aristide Tessitore, "Tocqueville and Gobineau on the Nature of Modern Politics," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (2005): 631-657. For a notable exception that I follow closely, see James W. Ceaser, *Reconstructing America: The Symbol of America in Modern Thought* (Yale University Press, 2000).

of behavior *inimical* to the preservation of dignity and human liberty in a democratic age: what Isaiah Berlin calls "irrational passivity," on the one hand, and "irrational fanatical activity," on the other.

## ERIC VOEGELIN AND "THE GNOSTIC ATTITUDE"

Just as Aristotle never provides a precise definition of moral virtue, so Voegelin never provides a formal definition of gnosticism. As bewildering as this is to some, however, the reason is actually quite simple: following Aristotle, Voegelin admits that for methodological reasons he cannot.[483] Insofar as political science is not geometry—insofar as moral and political things are irreducible to a precise science—providing formal or precise definitions for such phenomena would serve only to obfuscate rather than clarify their true nature.[484] It would serve only to follow in the footsteps of Hobbes as opposed to Aristotle and thus become a gnostic intellectual oneself.[485] Accordingly, rather than provide a precise definition of gnosticism, Voegelin lists "six characteristics that, taken together," reveal the essence of what he calls "the gnostic attitude".[486]

The first characteristic of the gnostic attitude, explains Voegelin, is being "dissatisfied" with one's situation.[487] It is essentially what, as we saw in the previous chapter, Tocqueville identifies as the "most common sickness of our time": restlessness.

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[483] See, for instance, Eugene Webb, "Voegelin's Gnosticism Reconsidered," *The Political Science Reviewer*, Vol. 34 (2005): pp. 48-76. While Webb is correct to observe that Voegelin's use of the term gnosticism is at best "imprecise," he also ignores the fact that Voegelin goes out of his way, several times, to argue that as a political phenomenon, gnosticism is irreducible to precise a definition.
[484] Compare Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b13-20 and 1104a1-10 with Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 61.
[485] See, for instance, Part 1 of *Leviathan* which might alternatively be titled "Of Reductionism".
[486] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 64.
[487] Voegelin, 64.

According to Voegelin, this is a characteristic that "in itself" is understandable. After all, "we all have cause to be not completely satisfied with one aspect or another of the situation in which we find ourselves."[488] Our lives are never, strictly speaking, perfect. However, in the context of modernity and, more specifically, the post-Christian world of modern democracy, this otherwise completely understandable fact of human existence is liable to give rise to a less than understandable belief. No longer convinced that happiness lies in another world, democratic man, as we have seen, believes instead that he can attain happiness in this one. He demands in the here and now what his aristocratic predecessor was content to wait for in the hereafter. Consequently, unlike his aristocratic predecessor, democratic man is liable to interpret his restlessness as being primarily if not exclusively a function of his physical or material condition and *not* of his unrequited spiritual longings. He is liable to interpret his dissatisfaction as a function exclusively of his 'socio-economic status' and is thus predisposed to believe the following: that as long as he remains restless or unhappy, it is because the here and now, the material world, remains "intrinsically poorly organized."[489]

The second characteristic of the gnostic attitude, this belief that the material world is intrinsically poorly organized is altogether less understandable than "the most common sickness of our time" because, as Voegelin explains, while it is certainly *possible* to assume that one's restlessness is the result of an intrinsically poorly organized world, it is "likewise possible to assume that the order of being as it is given to us men (wherever its

[488] Voegelin, 64.
[489] Voegelin, 64 (emphasis mine).

origin is to be sought) is *good* and that it is we as human beings who are inadequate."[490] In other words, it is likewise possible to assume what both Plato and Augustine, respectively, assume: that our dissatisfaction or restlessness is the result of either our erotic or fallen natures rather than our living in an intrinsically poorly organized world; that our unhappiness as human beings is the result of our having either a disordered soul or a divided will *and not* of our living in some miserable, "natural condition."[491] Those with a "gnostic attitude," however, tend to assume the opposite. They tend to assume what democratic man in general tends to assume: that our dissatisfaction or restlessness stems from something *external* to us; that, not our erotic or fallen natures but "fortune" or nature (*physis*) understood as something separate from convention (*nomos*) is to blame for our misery.[492]

Consequently, while the third characteristic of the gnostic attitude is the Christian belief that "salvation from the evil of the world is possible," the fourth characteristic is the *anti-Christian* notion that this salvation consists in changing the "historical process"—in man's *progressively conquering* that which is external to him, whether it be fortune or nature herself. According to Voegelin, this fourth characteristic is not "altogether self-evident, because the Christian solution might also be considered—namely, that the world throughout history will remain as it is and that man's salvational fulfillment is brought about through grace in death."[493] However, we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, just as the Christian belief that salvation from the evil in the world eventually

[490] Voegelin, 64 (emphasis mine).
[491] Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 2016), 579c-e; Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.15; Hobbes, *Leviathan,* XIII.
[492] Machiavelli, *The Prince,* 101; Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. XIII.
[493] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 64–65.

became immanentized, so too did the Christian solution. The doctrine of progress and the idea of man's salvation in the here and now came to replace the doctrine of Providence and therewith it, the idea of man's salvational fulfillment "brought about through grace in death." As a result, for the same reason that those with a "gnostic attitude" tend to assume that something *external to us* is to blame for our misery, they tend also to assume that something *intrinsic to us* can provide for the felicity, the happiness, that we so desire. To put it another way, those with a gnostic attitude tend to assume that rather than being dependent on the saving grace of God for salvation from the evil of world, man is dependent instead on what Machiavelli refers to as "virtue," Hobbes calls "the art of man," Rousseau calls "perfectibility," and Marx understands as "labour," respectively. Those with a gnostic attitude tend to assume salvation depends man's ability to *manipulate and control* both himself and the "intrinsically poorly organized world" around him—on man's ability to become both a "tyrant of himself and of nature."[494]

Not surprisingly, therefore, while the fifth characteristic of the gnostic attitude is "the belief that a change in the order of being lies in the realm of human action," the sixth and final characteristic of the gnostic attitude is "the construction of a formula for self and world salvation, as well as the gnostic's readiness to come forward as a prophet who will proclaim his knowledge about the salvation of mankind."[495] In Voegelin's view, if the idea that man has it within his power to save himself—if the idea that man is capable of transforming an imperfect reality into a perfect one—is taken for granted, then it is

[494] Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, II.29.3; Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction; Rousseau, *The Second Discourse*, 73; Karl Marx *Capital, Vol. 1*, 177.
[495] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 65.

only a matter time before someone will take up the task of seeking out "the prescription for such a change." Enter the modern thinker who, on account of his gnostic attitude, will see it as his task to construct a formula or system for precisely this change and, in so doing, reveal himself as a prophet with knowledge (*gnosis*) about the salvation of mankind. As a result of being dissatisfied with his situation, this thinker will eventually transition from philosophizing to claiming knowledge of a sort that is *beyond critical reflection* (ie. beyond questioning).[496] He will transition from trying to understand "what is" to disclosing, on the basis of his unimpeachable wisdom, "what is to be done".[497]

## THE GNOSTIC ATTITUDE OF DEMOCRATIC HISTORIANS

While many modern intellectuals exhibit this "gnostic attitude," not all of them are what Tocqueville calls historians in democratic centuries. In fact, some do not write history at all.[498] Moreover, of the many gnostic thinkers who *are* democratic historians, not all of them exhibit each and every characteristic of the gnostic attitude listed above. Indeed, as we shall see below, although no less a gnostic thinker than Hegel and Marx, Gobineau never goes so far as to argue (that is, at least explicitly) "that a change in the order of being lies in the realm of human action," let alone construct a "formula for self and world salvation."[499] On the contrary, Gobineau constructs the *mirror opposite*: what might be called a formula for self and world damnation. For now, however, it is

[496] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 33. As Voegelin writes, "Whoever reduces being [reality] to a system cannot permit questions that invalidate systems as a form of reasoning."
[497] See Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?* (International Publishers, 1969).
[498] These include, for instance, Thomas More, Thomas Hobbes, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heiddeger.
[499] I say "at least explicitly" because as both Hannah Arendt argues and Tocqueville intimates, despite his own claims to the contrary, Gobineau clearly had political motivations. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt, Inc., 1973), 173.

important simply to note the following: that whether a democratic historian of the kind who, like Hegel and Marx, constructs a formula for self and world salvation *or* a democratic historian of the kind who, like Gobineau, constructs a formula for self and world damnation, what *all* gnostic thinkers share in common is a pathological desire to demonstrate their "absolute cognitive mastery over reality"—which is to say to say, present themselves as intellectually infallible.[500]

According to Voegelin, what prompts someone to develop a gnostic attitude and claim this intellectual infallibility is all too human: it is the "loss of meaning that results from the breakdown of institutions, civilizations, and ethnic cohesion…"; it is the loss of meaning that results from a nation's or people's descent into what, as we saw in Chapter 2, the political theorist Tom Darby calls a "spiritual crisis."[501] As Voegelin characterizes it, this type of crisis occurs when the "interpenetration of cultures reduce men who exercise no control over the proceedings of history to an extreme state of forlornness in the turmoil of the world, of intellectual disorientation, of material and spiritual insecurity."[502] They occur during periods of history when, as Tocqueville himself puts it, "nations feel tormented by such great ills that the idea of a total change in their political constitution occurs to their mind." But as Voegelin also brings to light, while these crises (quite understandably) have a way of evoking attempts, whether by theologians or

[500] Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (University of Washington Press, 2015), 282. See also Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience" in *The Eric Voegelin Reader: Politics, History, and Consciousness*, ed. by Charles R. Embry and Glenn Hughes (University of Missouri Press, 2017), 236-237. In this essay, Voegelin contrasts "the proper task of the philosopher," which is to explore "the metaxy" or "in-between" reality characteristic of human existence, with the activity of thinkers who, "in their libidinous rush towards cognitive mastery over the hen or the apeiron" let this "in-between reality escape them" (236-237).
[501] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 7.
[502] Voegelin, 7.

philosophers, to find or locate *cosmos* in *chaos*—to provide society with an ideological synthesis so that people can not only make sense of, but also, *find meaning in* the turmoil that surrounds them—they also have a way of evoking attempts by less than philosophic intellectuals to construct systems that purport to explain social and political reality as a whole. They have a way of evoking attempts by gnostic intellectuals, in other words, to construct "absolute systems" that as Tocqueville, in the *Recollections*, characterizes them, are "false beneath the air of their mathematical truth."[503]

As Tocqueville presents them, these systems are often historical in nature. They are often the products of democratic poets-turned-historians, and for good reason. Let us recall that despite his realism, democratic man nevertheless exhibits a new form of idealism with respect to the future and thus with respect to history in general. Given his inordinate hope for happiness in this world, he exhibits a new form of idealism with respect to the future of "the real" that, as we saw in Chapter 3, finds its roots in Machiavelli and reaches its apex in Marx. Accordingly, when confronted by a spiritual crisis of the kind that confronted the French, for instance, following the Revolution, democratic man is naturally inclined to look to history as opposed to nature for meaning. He is naturally inclined to embrace a grand historical narrative that vindicates his belief in progress and, in so doing, hold out the promise of bringing serenity and calm to his otherwise perennially restless soul.

Important to recognize, however, is that by building absolute systems and, in effect, giving form and substance to the future of "the real" (to the "immense grandeur"

[503] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 45.

or "ideal perfection" that supposedly awaits humanity at the end of history) democratic poets-turned-historians are not simply providing a spiritual lift to otherwise restless readers. They are not simply providing meaning to democratic man's otherwise meaningless existence in time. Ultimately, they are engaging in something much more intellectually nefarious: what Voegelin provocatively calls "the murder of God." As Voegelin explains:

> The aim of parousiastic gnosticism is to destroy the order of being, which is experienced as defective and unjust, and through man's creative power to replace it with a perfect and just order. Now, however the order of being may be understood—as a world dominated by cosmic-divine powers in the civilizations of the Near and Far East, or as the creation of a world-transcendent God in Judeo-Christian symbolism, or as an essential order of being in philosophical contemplation—it remains something that is given, that is not under man's control. In order, therefore, that the attempt to create a new world may seem to make sense, the givenness of the order of being must be obliterated; the order of being must be interpreted, rather, as essentially under man's control. And taking control of being further requires that the transcendent origin of being be obliterated: it requires the decapitation of being—the murder of God.[504]

As should be evident, by "God," Voegelin does not necessarily mean a supernatural deity. Rather, he means only the "transcendent origin" of that which is "given" or, more specifically, that which is outside of man's control: the order of 'being'—the reality—in which man *happens* to find himself. Insofar as man is not the transcendent origin of what is given—insofar as he did not *create* either the world or himself—that which is given (reality) will forever remain, of necessity, *beyond* his complete comprehension and control. Not so for gnostic thinkers, however. So that their attempts to create a new world "may seem to make sense," they must interpret that which is outside of man's control as being essentially under man's control and thus obliterate the transcendent origin of that

[504] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 39–40.

which is "given." They must "decapitate" being and in effect, "murder God"—something that Voegelin elsewhere identifies as constructing a "second reality".

As Voegelin defines them, "second realities" are fictions or dream worlds conjured up by the imagination that, ultimately, have no basis in reality. At the same time, however, they are not *obviously* dream worlds because they present themselves as nevertheless being rooted in fact or history (ie. in that which is material and empirical).[505] They therefore consist in "the ideal" masquerading as "the real"—or, for our purposes, democratic poetry masquerading as democratic history. They are absolute historical systems of the kind that democratic poets, by turning from the idealization of nature or space to the idealization of time or history—by turning, metaphorically, from Spinoza to Hegel—are liable to conjure up in order to give form and substance to "the immense grandeur" that democratic man, according to Tocqueville, can otherwise but "vaguely see at the end of the long course humanity must still cover."

To be sure, Tocqueville himself does not describe historians in democratic centuries as gnostic intellectuals much less accuse them of murdering God or constructing second realities. Unlike Voegelin, he never goes so far as to systematically diagnose their psychology as intellectuals. Still, given his own characterization of God and, in particular, the relationship between that characterization, on the one hand, and what he regards as the theoretical limits of man, on the other, it would be fair to say that

[505] Eric Voegelin, "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 12: Published Essays 1966-1985*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 318. "If the activist," writes Voegelin, "wants to avoid the fate of being shrugged aside as a silly person, he must try to eclipse reality by a counterimage that will furnish a plausible basis for the action he calls for. In order to serve this purpose it must fulfill two conditions: it must cover the structure of reality with sufficient comprehensiveness to appear, by the standard prevailing at the time, debatable as a true image; and it must be analytically obscure enough not to reveal its character of a dream image at the first place."

by claiming to know the future of "the real" (ie. by claiming knowledge of a sort that is beyond questioning), many of these historians are essentially doing what Voegelin, in the passage above, describes.

Let us recall that in his discussion of democratic man's aptitude and taste for general ideas, Tocqueville begins by comparing man to God. "God does not consider the human species in general. He sees at a single glance and separately all the beings who make up humanity, and he notices each of them with the similarities that bring each closer to the others and the differences that isolate each."[506] God, in short, sees everyone and everything. Nothing obscures His sight; nothing escapes His view. By contrast, man *does* consider the human species in general because unlike God man *lacks* the intellectual capacity to see at a glance everyone separately. His sight is, relatively speaking, limited. While he can no doubt see *some* of the beings who make up humanity, he can never see all of them. And of those he can see, he sees them only "superficially".[507] He notices their similarities but not so much their differences. He does not see them for who they really are.

So it follows that whereas God "does not need general ideas," man cannot theorize—whether about politics or history—without them. God, explains Tocqueville, "never feels the necessity to encompass a very great number of analogous objects within the same form in order to think about them more comfortably." This, however, is not the case with man. As Tocqueville goes on to elaborate:

> If the human mind undertook to examine and to judge individually all the particular cases that strike it, it would soon be lost amid the immensity of details and would no longer see

[506] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 726–27.
[507] Tocqueville, 728.

> anything; in this extremity, it resorts to an imperfect, but necessary procedure that helps its weakness and proves it.[508]

Alas, just as man cannot do without dogmatic beliefs, so he cannot do without general ideas: whereas the former spare him the theoretical burden of having to "examine everything by himself" (an intellectual task that, according to Tocqueville, not even philosophers are capable of carrying out), the latter spare him the theoretical burden of having to "judge individually all the particular cases" that strike his mind (an intellectual task that only God, according to Tocqueville, has the intellectual capacity to perform). In order to make sense of both himself and the world around him—in order to engage in that part of politics Tocqueville calls "fixed"—man has no choice but to generalize. He has no choice but to engage in reductionism.

As Tocqueville therefore frames it, whereas God—by virtue of being God—can see the "whole" of "what is," man—by virtue of the fact that he is not God—can at best see only a "part" of "what is".[509] In Books 5 and 6 of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates defends the idea that philosophers, despite their reputations, are best equipped to rule because unlike "lovers of sights," "lovers of hearing," and "the practical men," philosophers are "*lovers of the sight of the truth*"—that is, of "the whole" of "what is" as opposed to "what seems" or worse, "what is not." Even so, Socrates never goes so far as to argue that philosophers, as lovers of wisdom, are *themselves wise*. To be sure, when compared to everyone else, philosophers are "awake."[510] But to be "awake" as opposed to "dreaming" is not to be *omniscient*—and this is Tocqueville's point*:* what most men are to

[508] Tocqueville, 727.
[509] Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, 51.
[510] Plato, *Republic*, 476a-d (emphasis mine).

philosophers, all men (including philosophers) are to God. As he writes in an editorial note in the previous chapter:

> There is no man in the world who has ever found, and it is nearly certain that none will ever be met who will find the central ending point for, I am not saying all the beams of general truth, which are united only in God alone, but even for all the beams of a particular truth. *Men grasp fragments of truth, but never truth itself.*[511]

In Tocqueville's view, there are certain limits attached to what human beings can know—there are limits to what human reason can explain about the nature of reality, whether it be physical, social, or political. It may very well be the case that at some point, someone will find what "no man in the world" has hitherto been able to find: all the beams of a "particular truth." As for all the beams of general truth, however, those are "united in God alone." In effect, human beings can grasp only *fragments* of the truth, but never "truth itself." This is simply a fact of human existence—part of the "givenness" of our nature as human beings.[512]

Yet, from the perspective of certain democratic historians, Tocqueville has it wrong. As children of the Enlightenment, they not only take for granted the notion that man is capable of grasping truth itself, but also, that he can grasp it *precisely because* of his ability to discern general causes and conceive of general ideas.[513] As discussed at

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[511] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 715. See note "f" (emphasis mine).
[512] James Ceaser, "Alexis de Tocqueville on Political Science, Political Culture, and the Role of the Intellectual," *The American Political Science Review,* Vol. 79, No. 3 (1985), 662. As Ceaser puts it, "A perfectly accurate understanding of reality, Tocqueville tells us, cannot be attained, for it would require a humanly impossible method that could somehow reap all the benefits of generalizing while avoiding all of its defects. Only God can employ such a method, for He alone 'can survey distinctly and simultaneously, all mankind and each single man'. Science does the best it can using the limited tools of human intelligence to emulate this God-like standard."
[513] James Ceaser, 662. "The thought of philosophe intellectuals," observes Ceaser, "ignores completely this God-like standard by attempting to subsume more and more of 'reality' into abstract general ideas without regard to the existence of particulars. Instead minimizing the defect inherent in the structure of human thought, the philosophe intellectual acerbates it."

length in Chapter 2, unlike aristocratic historians who "ordinarily make all events depend on the particular will and the mood of certain men," democratic historians "give great general causes to all the small particular facts."[514] In Tocqueville's view, this stems in large part from the fact that they are too lazy to sift through a host of secondary causes that, in ages of equality become "more varied, more hidden, more complicated, less powerful, and consequently more difficult to disentangle."[515] But as he also points out, this tendency to attribute all particular facts to great general causes stems, in addition, from a much more pathological impulse on their part to demonstrate their absolute cognitive mastery over reality—to make a knowledge claim about the "whole" that, *without* identifying general causes and forming ideas, they simply would not be able to make. "*It is not enough*," writes Tocqueville, "*for them to show how facts happened*; *they like as well to reveal that it could not have happened otherwise*." They like to reveal how "*each nation is invincibly tied, by its position, its origin, its antecedents, its nature, to a certain destiny that all its efforts cannot change*."[516] Put another way, democratic historians like to interpret the past for sake of prophesizing the future. To do this persuasively, however, these historians must either willfully ignore or *disingenuously subordinate to* a great general cause all of the "secondary" causes that, as noted above, become more difficult to disentangle in ages of equality. They must, in short, engage in an intellectual swindle by casting the spirit of civilization, the climate, race (or as we saw

[514] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 853.
[515] Tocqueville, 855.
[516] Tocqueville, 858 (emphasis mine).

in the introduction, "economic relations") as the prime mover of everything that "in the final analysis" happens in the world. As Tocqueville explains:

> M. de Lafayette said somewhere in his Mémoires that the exaggerated system of general causes brought marvelous consolations to mediocre public men. I add that it gives admirable consolations to mediocre historians. It always provides them with a few great reasons that promptly pull them through at the most difficult point in their book, and it favors the weakness or laziness of their minds, *all the while honoring its depth*.[517]

Here, Tocqueville reveals that on account of their ambition to show not simply "how facts happened" but how facts "could not have happened otherwise," historians in democratic centuries are liable to design "exaggerated" systems of general causes. On the one hand, these systems cater to their intellectual sloth. By providing them with a "few great reasons that promptly pull through at the most difficult point" in their books, these systems serve as a convenient means for cutting through the noise of history—through all the secondary causes that, especially in ages of equality, complicate rather than clarify what happens on the world stage. On the other hand, however, these systems cater to their intellectual hubris. They "honor the depths" as much they favor the "laziness" of their minds, and thus allow them to claim knowledge of a sort that given their intellectual limits as human beings, remains beyond their reach.[518]

In his own way, therefore, Tocqueville also seems to recognize that rather than simply providing hope or a spiritual lift to their readers, democratic historians are ultimately engaged in something much more intellectually nefarious than meets the eye.

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[517] Tocqueville, 856.

[518] Earlier, Tocqueville explains how in democracy, the desire "for easy success and present enjoyments…is found in intellectual careers as in all others. Most of those who live in times of equality are full of an ambition intense and soft at the same time; they want to gain great successes immediately, but they would like to excuse themselves from great efforts. *These opposing instincts lead them directly to the search for general ideas, by the aid of which they flatter themselves to portray very vast matters at little cost, and to attract the attention of the public without difficulty*" (736) (emphasis mine).

For by designing absolute historical systems that not only show how facts happened, but also, that bind individuals and even entire nations to a "certain destiny" they "cannot change," what these historians are in effect doing is replacing God—a being who imagines nothing because He can see "everything"—with themselves: beings who, because they are human have no choice *but* to imagine everything they cannot fully see.

Near the end of his chapter on poetry, Tocqueville reveals that the imagination is an intellectual faculty unique to man—a creature who, unlike the animals, is aware of his existence but who, unlike God, cannot make sense of it. As he explains:

> If man were completely unaware of himself, he would not be poetic; for what you have no idea about you cannot portray. If he saw himself clearly, his imagination would remain dormant and would have nothing to add to the picture. But man is revealed enough for him to see something of himself, and hidden enough for the rest to disappear into impenetrable shadows, into which he plunges constantly and always in vain, in order finally to understand himself.[519]

In this passage, Tocqueville implicitly alludes to what, as we saw in the previous chapter, he eventually makes explicit: that in his view, man is part brute, part angel—between the animals and God. Whereas the animals are "unaware" and, as a result, have no idea of themselves to "portray," God—as we have already noted above—is completely aware and, as a result, sees himself clearly. He has, as Tocqueville puts it, nothing else to "add to the picture."[520] Man, however, is not so fortunate. He finds himself in the altogether awkward position of being at once *aware and unaware*. He is aware in the sense that he, unlike the animals, has an idea of himself. But is he unaware in the sense that he, unlike God, cannot see himself clearly. Consequently, in order to make sense of what he (unlike

[519] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 840.
[520] Tocqueville, 832. In an earlier draft of this chapter, Tocqueville wrote that "The greatest proof of the misery of man is poetry. God cannot make poetry; he sees everything clearly." See note "c."

the animals) can see, man must imagine all of that which he, unlike God, remains blind to. He must "add" to an incomplete picture of himself by way of using his *imagination*; he must rely on his imagination, as Lawler observes, to complete what his reason discovers.[521]

From the foregoing, however, it is clear that by building absolute historical systems, democratic poets-turned-historians are doing something much more intellectually dishonest than simply adding, by way of using their imaginations, to an incomplete picture. To continue the metaphor, what democratic poets-turned-historians are in effect doing is *cloaking what they have imagined in the guise of reason*—their poetry in the guise of philosophical or scientific history—and thus *further obfuscating* what is already incomplete to begin with. "Man comes out of nothing, passes through time, and goes to disappear forever into the bosom of God," writes Tocqueville. "You see him only for a moment wandering at the edge of the two abysses where he gets lost."[522] Herein lies the purpose of the imagination: to help make sense of the mystery and often, misery or restlessness characteristic of man's existence; to provide some kind of "understanding of the meaning of human existence in the given conditions of the world." By creating exaggerated systems of general causes, however, democratic poets-turned-historians are using their imaginations for an altogether different purpose. Rather than using it to help make sense of the mystery and often, misery or restlessness characteristic of man's existence, they are instead using it to overcome that mystery—to distort what

[521] Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, 51. According to Lawler, "Tocqueville's theory is that the imaginations must complete what reason discovers to give human beings the comprehensive view of themselves within the whole of existence they need to order and direct their lives."
[522] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 840.

reason discovers by way of collapsing the irreducibly complex nature of reality into exaggerated systems of general causes.

Philosophy, explains Voegelin, "springs from the love of being; it is man's loving endeavor to perceive the order of being and attune himself to it."[523] It is to interpret the world and, in particular, strive to understand what Socrates refers to as "the human things." But it is also an activity that, given man's theoretical limits, at best issues in the discovery of perennial questions about if not actual knowledge *of* such things. It is an activity for creatures who, unlike the gods, remain unwise but who unlike the animals, love or desire to *know*. Gnosis, on the other hand, "desires dominion over being".[524] It desires closure from the restlessness characteristic of man's existence in general and, as we saw in Chapter 3, democratic man's existence in particular. It desires actual knowledge of "the human things" so that perennial questions about them can be answered *once and for all*. So it follows that to abandon philosophy in favor of gnosis is to follow the modern way of Marx as opposed to the classical way of Socrates. It is to abandon philosophy for constructing an ideology so that man can enjoy the very closure from the irreducibly complex nature of reality that he so desires. It is, in other words, to set for oneself the very theoretical task that Hegel, in the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, explicitly sets for himself. As Hegel writes,

> The systematic development of truth in scientific form can alone be the true shape in which truth exists. To help bring philosophy nearer to the form of science—that goal where it can lay aside the name of *love* of knowledge and be actual *knowledge*—that is what I have set before me.[525]

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[523] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 32.
[524] Voegelin, 32.
[525] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baille (Dover Publications, Inc., 2012), 3 (emphasis Hegel's).

Here, Hegel professes his desire to transform philosophy (the love of knowledge) into actual knowledge (gnosis)—to attain and disclose to his readers something otherwise reserved to God (actual wisdom), and thus replace God with man and, more specifically, himself. But according to Voegelin, what Hegel has set for himself is an impossible task. In keeping with Tocqueville's claim that human beings can grasp fragments of the truth but never the truth itself, Voegelin points out that "'actual knowledge' is reserved to God alone; finite man can only be the 'lover of knowledge,' not himself the one who knows."[526] What Hegel actually does, then, is not so much achieve actual knowing as he does design a system of exaggerated general causes so as to make reality *seem* or *appear* much less complex than actually it is. What he does is build an absolute historical system of the kind that, by literally reducing all of "Reality" to what he calls "Geist," is "false beneath the air of [its] mathematical truth."[527]

## TOCQUEVILLE'S CONFRONTATION WITH THE GNOSTIC ATTITUDE: ARTHUR DE GOBINEAU AND RACE AS THE "MASTER-KEY" TO HISTORY

[526] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 31.

[527] Hegel, 13. As Hegel writes, "That the truth is only realized in the form of system, that substance is essentially subject, is expressed in the idea which represents the Absolute as Spirit (Geist)—the grandest conception of all, and one which is to modern times and its religion. Spirit alone is Reality. It is the inner being of the world, that which essentially is, and is per se; it assumes objective, determinate form, and enters into relations with itself—it is externality (otherness), and exists for itself; yet, in this determination and its otherness, it is still one with itself—it is self-contained and self-complete, in itself and for itself at once" (emphasis mine). See also, Eric Voegelin, "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery" in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. by Elis Sandoz (Louisiana State University Press, 1990): 213-255. In this essay, Voegelin argues that Hegel is perhaps best understood as having "two selves." On the one hand, he is a "sensitive philosopher and spiritualist, a noetically and pneumatically competent critic of the age, an intellectual force of the first rank…" On the other hand, however, "he cannot quite gain the stature of his true self as a man under God. From the darkness of this existential deficiency, then, rises the *libido dominandi* and forces him into the imaginative construction of a false self as the messiah of the new age."

At the very beginning of his essay "On Debate and Existence," Voegelin describes a situation that "as political scientists, historians, or philosophers, we all have had occasion at one time or another" to find ourselves in: that of debating a gnostic thinker of the kind discussed above. As Voegelin elaborates, in this situation, we have all discovered…

> …that no agreement, or even an honest disagreement, could be reached, because the exchange of argument was disturbed by a profound difference of attitude with regard to all fundamental questions of human existence—with regard to the nature of man, to his place in the world, to his place in society and history, to his relation to God. Rational argument could not prevail because the partner to the discussion did not accept as binding for himself the matrix of reality in which specific questions concerning our existence as human beings are ultimately rooted; he has overlaid the reality of existence with another mode of existence that Robert Musil has called the Second Reality. The argument could not achieve results, it had to falter and peter out, as it became increasingly clear that not argument was pitched against argument, but that behind the appearance of rational debate there lurked the difference of two modes of existence, of existence in truth and existence in untruth.[528]

Here, Voegelin explains why debating a gnostic thinker is a fruitless endeavor. In a situation such as this, there is no prospect for reason to prevail because there is no shared understanding of reality such that constructive debate (ie. dialectic) is possible. Whatever the "exchange" consists in, it is doomed to fail because there already exists an underlying, much more profound, disagreement between participants over fundamental questions related to human existence. As a result, even honest disagreement becomes untenable. Insofar as the "partner to the discussion" has overlaid reality with a second one of his own making, the gnostic thinker remains closed off to rational argumentation. In a situation such as this, the "universe of rational discourse," according to Voegelin, "collapses."[529]

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[528] Eric Voegelin, "On Debate and Existence" in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 12: Published Essays 1966-1985*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 36.
[529] Voegelin, 36.

As Voegelin presents it, this is a situation that characterizes debate, in particular, with "communists"—"ideologists" on the political Left. Interestingly, however, in his own capacity as a political scientist and historian (if not a philosopher), Tocqueville found himself in just this situation with an ideologist on the political Right. Indeed, as his correspondence with Arthur de Gobineau illustrates, behind the appearance of what presents itself as a rational debate, there exists a much more profound and ultimately irreconcilable disagreement between the two over the very questions of human existence that Voegelin lists in the passage above.

Comprised of 82 letters, this correspondence can be separated into three distinct periods: 1843 to 1844; 1849 to 1852; and 1853 to 1859.[530] For our purposes, however, the second and third periods are the most important as it is during these periods where the exchange between Tocqueville and Gobineau not only takes a turn for the worse, but also, where it becomes increasingly clear that despite their friendship, they belong to two, fundamentally different modes of existence: one in uncertain truth and the other in certain untruth.

In a letter dated October 11, 1853, Tocqueville tells Gobineau that "through an extraordinary coincidence" he has received a copy of the latter's recently published *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*—a democratic history in which Gobineau advances what can only be described, paradoxically, as a thoroughly *anti-democratic* argument. "Every assemblage of men, however ingenious the network of social relations that protects it," begins Gobineau, "acquires on the very day of its birth, hidden among the

[530] Michael D. Biddiss, "Prophecy and Pragmatism: Gobineau's Confrontation with Tocqueville," *The Historical Journal* Vol. 13, No. 4. (1970), 614.

elements of its life, the seed of an inevitable death."[531] What is that seed of an inevitable death? According to Gobineau, it is not so obvious. "The causes usually given for the fall of nations are not necessarily the real causes," he argues.[532] Causes like "fanaticism, luxury, or the corruption of morals" may very well *seem* to be responsible for the fall of nations. However, these causes are at best secondary, not primary. What is primary, rather, is the "adulteration" over time of a given race's "blood."[533] What is primary is the "mixture" of races (miscegenation) and, in particular, the mixture of the "white race" with other, "inferior" races.[534] For as Gobineau eventually concludes, "*Such is the lesson of history*. It shows us that all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it..."[535] Simply put, history shows the *complete opposite* of what democratic historians like Mignet, Thierry, Guizot and even Tocqueville himself argue it shows. It shows that inequality is more natural than equality and thus that aristocracy is more natural than democracy.[536]

As mentioned above, however, despite the *Essai*'s fundamentally anti-democratic argument, as a historian Gobineau is, paradoxically, *no less* democratic than any other democratic historian properly so-called (whether it be Mignet, Thierry, Guizot,

[531] Arthur de Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races*, trans. by Adrian Collins (William Heinemann, 1915), 2.
[532] Gobineau, 6.
[533] Gobineau, 25.
[534] Gobineau, 209.
[535] Gobineau, 210.
[536] For an excellent discussion of the relationship between democracy and nature see Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, 67-80.

Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Comte, Hegel, or Marx).[537] As Ceaser observes, "Gobineau was not in the camp of thinkers who rejected reason outright in favor of tradition or submission to Providence. Although conservative in his political position, Gobineau spoke as the originator of a new, more accurate, and more comprehensive form of science—a 'science of history' akin to the positivistic sciences of geology or medicine."[538] No, he does not affirm the modern idea of progress. On the contrary, he argues that progress is an illusion.[539] However, unlike de Maistre's more traditional theory of history—a theory that, as we saw in Chapter 2, *does* argue for submission to providence—Gobineau's theory of history nevertheless promotes the same "extreme and dangerous form of democratic thought" that the theories of his progressive rivals promote.[540] "Whereas de Maistre turned from science to religion (and to providential governance of history) as the ultimate guide for political life, Gobineau looks to a new kind of science predicated on a full understanding of the laws of history."[541] Thus, despite his politics Gobineau follows in the footsteps of Voltaire and Hegel as opposed to those of Augustine and Bossuet (more on this below).

Accordingly, the ensuing confrontation between Tocqueville and Gobineau over the latter's *Essai* has, surprisingly enough, considerably less to do with the altogether

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[537] Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, 96. "In method and approach," observes Ceaser, "Gobineau was far more a historian than an anthropologist. He proceeded by inferring properties of the races from an analysis of the historical record rather than by conducting scientific observations of the physical properties of different peoples."
[538] Ceaser, 141.
[539] Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races*, 155. As Gobineau writes: "Do all men possess in an equal degree an unlimited power of intellectual development? In other words, has every human race the capacity for becoming equal to every other? The question is ultimately concerned with the infinite capacity for improvement possessed by the species as a whole, and with the equality of races. I deny both points."
[540] Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, 140.
[541] Ceaser, 93.

disturbing normative implications of Gobineau's argument than it does with theoretical status of that argument. Commonly referred to as "The Father of Racism," a "direct line of influence can be drawn from Gobineau's thought to the "thought of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Oswald Spengler, Alfred Rosenberg, and Adolf Hitler."[542] Overall, however, Tocqueville is less troubled by his friend's racism than by his friend's intellectual hubris as a historian. Yes, Tocqueville takes issue with the fact that the *Essai*, insofar as it is overtly racist, is liable to justify and thereby perpetuate the existence of certain "evils."[543] But as it quickly becomes apparent, it is Gobineau's *own* gnostic attitude—his *own* construction of an absolute historical system—that Tocqueville is particularly concerned with.

At first, Tocqueville refrains from saying "too much" about Gobineau's book—only that he is "greatly prejudiced against what seems to be its principal idea" and that, given his own "pre-existent ideas" on race, Tocqueville feels as though he has "been drawn into battle."[544] What are those pre-existent ideas? In a letter dated May 15, 1852—written nearly a year before he receives Gobineau's *Essai*—Tocqueville reveals that he regards race as nothing more or less than another "general idea": something that human beings, in their quest for truth, cannot help but form and rely on, but that at the same time, attests to the weakness of human reason as opposed to its strength. After having read, at Gobineau's request, a chapter on the "unity of mankind" in Flourens's *Histoire des traveaux et des idées de Buffon*, Tocqueville expresses his essential agreement with

[542] Ceaser, 88.
[543] As Tocqueville at one-point tells him, "Don't you see know inherent in your doctrine are all of the evils produced by permanent inequality: pride, violence, the scorn of one's fellow men, tyranny and abjection in every one of their forms?"
[544] Tocqueville to Gobineau, October 11, 1853, *Correspondence*, 224.

Flourens: not only is mankind unified but, to the extent that there is a "diversity of races" among human beings, this diversity exists largely—if not entirely—on account of "*three secondary and external causes*: of climate, of food, and of the manner of life."[545] Consequently, while Tocqueville does not deny the existence of race, he also never grants it the theoretical status and corresponding explanatory power that Gobineau does. That race is a function not only of inheritable or inborn traits, but also, of *environmental factors*, means that as epistemologically useful as it may *seem*, it is an inherently slippery concept that, as such, cannot provide the human mind "with anything other than incomplete notions." Race exists, but because it is neither wholly constructed (ie. inessential) nor wholly biological (ie. essential), it has much less value as an explanatory variable than Gobineau assumes.[546]

Not surprisingly, therefore, in a follow-up letter dated November 17, 1853, Tocqueville admits that while there is no doubt *something* to the idea of race—that is, at least insofar as there are "externally recognizable differences" among the different "human families"—this idea simply cannot do the theoretical work that Gobineau has it do. According to Gobineau, race is the motor of history *precisely because* "racial differences are permanent" (ie. essential).[547] That they cannot be overcome means that 'in the final analysis' (to borrow Engels' language), they are the determining factor in how

[545] Tocqueville to Gobineau, May 15, 1852, *Correspondence*, 221-222 (emphasis mine).
[546] For an excellent discussion on Tocqueville's by comparison responsible use of the concept of race, see Edward Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race: New Racisms and the Problem of Grouping in the Human Sciences* (Routledge, 2010), 24-44. According to Beasly, "What 'race' meant in Tocqueville's work depended entirely upon context, and so he did not succumb to racial dogmas."
[547] Knowing full well that unless he can prove this his entire theory of history would collapse, Gobineau devotes an entire chapter of the *Essai* to refuting what he characterizes as the "unitarian" position: namely, the position that racial differences are fluid (as opposed to permanent) because they are the products of external causes like habits, climate, and locality.

the different "human families" behave not only amongst themselves, but also towards one another. As a result, while it is not wrong to associate certain changes in the "constitution of races" with "external causes" (climate, for instance), it is wrong to argue, he concludes, that external causes can "fully explain many vital divergences" between them that persist.[548] That there is something about race which is "absolutely fixed, hereditary, and permanent, in spite of climate and lapse of time," means that when it comes to understanding the historical process, race and not the climate, race and not mores, race and not class, is what matters.[549] Only the "crossing of blood," he insists, can scientifically account for the rise and fall of nations over time.[550]

But for Tocqueville, what Gobineau argues concerning the causally definitive status of race is *at best* speculative. As he tells him:

> Surely among the different families which compose the human race there exist certain tendencies, certain proper aptitudes resulting from thousands of different causes. But that these tendencies, that these capacities should be insuperable has not only never been proved but no one will ever be able to prove it *since to do so one would need to knowledge not only the past but also the future*.[551]

Again, Tocqueville takes no issue with the claim that "among the different families" of the human race, there exist certain tendencies, certain proper aptitudes…" Race in no uncertain terms exists. But for him, these tendencies and aptitudes are the result of "thousands of different causes," not a single "great" one as Gobineau maintains. Human beings are not simply the blood in their veins, let alone "unequal" because of it. To prove that, Tocqueville points out, would require knowledge not only of the past but of the

[548] Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races*, 120.
[549] Gobineau, 125.
[550] Gobineau, 138.
[551] Tocqueville to Gobineau, November 17, 1853, *Correspondence*, 228.

future, as well. It would require knowledge, to put it another way, of the whole of human history, from its beginning to its very end.

To be sure, Gobineau claims to have such knowledge. With regard to the past, he states the following: "The thick mists, the profound darkness that from time immemorial veiled the beginnings of civilizations different from our own, now lift and *dissolve under the sun of science*."[552] So confident is he that it is now possible to know the "beginnings of civilizations" that he not only declares it possible "to reconstruct, with the aid of the most authentic materials, that which constitutes the personality of races and mainly determines their value," but also, that it would be irresponsible to consult anything else. As he further elaborates:

> Since we have now an abundance of positive facts crowding upon us from all sides, rising from every sepulchre, and lying ready to every seeker's hand, we may no longer, like the theorists of the Revolution, form a collection of imaginary beings out of clouds, and amuse ourselves by moving these chimeras about like marionettes, in a political environment manufactured to suit them. The reality is now too pressing, too well known; and it forbids games like these, which are always unseasonable, and sometimes impious.[553]

In this passage, Gobineau reveals that given the abundance of "positive facts" about the past now available, there is no longer any excuse to do what the "theorists of the Revolution" once did. These theorists, suggests Gobineau, were simply using their imaginations. They were not so much theorists as they were poets playing games: amusing themselves with their own fabrications. Gobineau, however, differs. Instead of forming a collection of imaginary beings out of clouds, he is conducting *real science*; he

[552] Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races*, xii.
[553] Gobineau, xiii.

is responding to a "reality" which, in his view, is "now too pressing," and "too well known."

What is that reality? According to Gobineau, it is that the white race and therewith it, civilization, is dying. As mentioned above, for Gobineau the lesson of history is that "all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help." Yet, as an analysis of the "facts" apparently *also* reveals, insofar as the white race has failed to preserve its blood (has failed to keep itself "pure"), it is no longer in a position to preserve all of the civilizations that derive from it. As Gobineau, at length, explains:

> The white race originally possessed the monopoly of beauty, intelligence, and strength. By its union with other varieties, hybrids were created, which were beautiful without strength, strong without intelligence, or, if intelligent, both weak and ugly. Further, when the quantity of white blood was increased to an indefinite amount by successive infusions, and not by a single admixture, it no longer carried with it its natural advantages, and often merely increased the confusion already existing in the racial elements. Its strength, in fact, seemed to be its only remaining quality, and even its strength served only to promote disorder. The apparent anomaly is easily explained. Each stage of a perfect mixture produces a new type from diverse elements, and develops special faculties. As soon as further elements are added, the vast difficulty of harmonizing the whole creates a state of anarchy. The more this increases, the more do even the best and richest of the new contributions diminish in value, and by their mere presence add fuel to an evil which they *cannot abate*.[554]

Consequently, Gobineau is convinced that however "bad" is the democratic "present," the "future" will be "far worse." In a passage that, as Voegelin describes it, is reminiscent of Nietzsche, Gobineau concludes his *Essai* by describing not the "ideal perfection" but the regrettable "end" towards which mankind is inevitably headed:

> The peoples—no, the human herds—will soon, overcome by gloomy narcolepsy, vegetate without feeling in their own nullity, like the buffalo chewing its cud in the stagnating puddles of the Pontine marshes. Perhaps they will think of themselves as the wisest, most erudite, and most capable beings that ever existed…Our descendants,

[554] Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races*, 209–10 (emphasis mine).

> covered with shame, will have no difficulty finding some…reason by virtue of which they can bestow pity on us and to turn their barbarity into a badge of honor.[555]

Lo and behold: just as Gobineau has actual knowledge of the past, so he apparently has accurate knowledge of the future, as well. To be sure, this is not a future that most other democratic historians—those theorists of the Revolution, as Gobineau refers to them—describe. It is not some "immense grandeur" that consists, for instance, in the "perfection of the social order," in the "positive realization and satisfaction of freedom," or in "the abolition of all classes".[556] Rather, it is an immense *catastrophe* that consists in the reduction of mankind to a herd of buffalo chewing cud. Whereas most other democratic historians, as we have seen, come forward as secular prophets with "knowledge about the salvation of mankind," Gobineau therefore does the mirror opposite: he comes forward as a secular prophet who proclaims his knowledge about the *destruction* of mankind.

And yet, as already alluded to above, from a purely theoretical perspective this is a distinction without a difference. Gobineau may very well *think* that his *Essai* differs from the "fabrications" of his progressive rivals. He might very well *believe* that his book contains nothing more or less than the historical equivalent of "geology, medicine, archaeology" (that it is nothing or more or less than "research," "exposition," and the "presentation of facts"). But as Tocqueville proceeds to reveal, insofar as the validity of what the *Essai* argues depends on its being epistemologically *infallible*—on Gobineau having unquestionably accurate knowledge of both the past and the future—it is in fact

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[555] Eric Voegelin in "The Expansion of the Horizon Through History" in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 2: Race and State*, Ed. by Klaus Vondung (Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 163-164.

[556] Henri comte de Saint-Simon and Augustin Thierry, *De la réorganisation de la société européenne*, 111–12; Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 94; Karl Marx, "Class Struggle and Mode of Production" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert C. Tucker (Norton, 1978), 220.

no less a fabrication, no less a product of the imagination, than any other absolute historical system properly so-called. As Tocqueville writes,

> What, in this whole world, is more difficult to find than the place, the time, and the composite elements that produced men who by now possess no visible traces of their mixed origins? Those events took place in remote and barbaric times, leaving us nothing but vague myths or written fragments.
>
> Do you really believe that by tracing the destiny of peoples along these lines you can truly clarify history? And that our knowledge about humans becomes more certain as we abandon the practice followed since the beginning of time by the many great minds who have searched to find the cause of human events in the influence of certain men, of *certain* emotions, of certain thoughts, and of certain beliefs?[557]

Near the beginning of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville raises an important theoretical question concerning whether and to what extent it is possible to accurately locate in history what he calls the "point of departure" of nations and here, he does something similar. Is it possible, he asks Gobineau, to locate the point of departure of races? Is it possible to find "the place, the time, and the composite elements responsible for producing those who today, bear no resemblance to their ancestors"? For Tocqueville, the answer to this question is obvious: no, it is not. For the same reason that locating the point of departure of nations is for the most part now impossible, locating the point of departure of races is also now impossible: both remain shrouded in "vague myths" or, as he calls them in *Democracy in America*, "fables that hide the truth" (more on this in Chapter 5).

In effect, Gobineau's self-proclaimed "purely scientific theory" of history is from the point of view of Tocqueville hardly scientific at all. In fact, it is so unscientific that Julius Caesar, according to Tocqueville, would have devised something similar, "had he had the time." As Tocqueville writes:

[557] Tocqueville to Gobineau, November 17, 1853, *Correspondence*, 228.

> I am sure that Julius Caesar, had he had the time, would have willingly written a book to prove that the savages he had met in Britain did not belong to the same race as the Romans, and that the latter were destined thus by nature to rule the world while the former were destined to vegetate in one of its corners. *Tu regere imperio populous, Romane, memento*, said our old acquaintance Virgil.[558]

Here, Tocqueville exposes the *Essai* for what it is: democratic poetry *dressed up* as scientific history. At first, he seems merely to suggest that the *Essai* amounts to nothing more or less than an exercise in confirmation bias—a book that Julius Caesar, given his own anecdotal evidence and corresponding racial prejudices, would have also written. But then, Tocqueville quotes a line from Virgil's *Aeneid* which reads: "You, who are Roman, recall how to govern mankind with your power."[559] What is interesting about this line is not simply the fact that it foreshadows Gobineau's own racial prejudices—his own belief that a certain race in particular is inherently superior to all other races—but that it appears in a passage in which Aeneas's father, Anchises, prognosticates the future of Rome by showing his son how "Caesar Augustus, born of a god," will one day establish a "golden age" among the Romans. The implication: Gobineau's *Essai* is much less scientific, much less factual, much more poetic, and thus much more *imaginary* than meets the eye.[560] It is like any other absolute system that is "false beneath the air" of its "mathematical truth": a "second reality" of Gobineau's own making.[561]

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[558] Tocqueville to Gobineau, November 17, 1853, *Correspondence*, 228.
[559] Virgil, *Aeneid* (OUP Oxford, 2008), 151.
[560] For analysis of just how unscientific and even poetic Gobineau's *Essai* is, see Michael Biddiss, "History as Destiny: Gobineau, H.S. Chamberlin, and Spengler," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 7 (1997), 98. As Biddiss observes, "Whenever the need to establish clear criteria of truth and falsifiability becomes pressing, all three of these authors [Gobineau, Chamberlin, and Spengler] retreat into *mere lyrical assertion*" (emphasis mine).
[561] Eric Voegelin, "The Drama of Humanity" in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 33: The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers 1939-1985*, ed. by William Petropulous and Gilber Weiss (University of Missouri Press, 2004), 226. As Voegelin here explains, insofar as Gobineau's philosophy of history posits "that the basis of all order in the world, of all intelligible order, [is in] the races and the struggle between races," it is a modern construction that, like those of Marx and Hegel, "exemplifies" the revolt of man against God [the transcendent origin of 'being']."

In the preface to his *Essai*, Gobineau admits—in remarkable keeping with Voegelin's diagnosis of the gnostic attitude—that what initially prompted him to write it was a loss of meaning that resulted from the moral and political turmoil, the breakdown of institutions, civilizations, and ethnic cohesion, characteristic of his time.[562] "The great events—the bloody wars, the revolutions, and the breaking up of laws—which have been rife for so many years in the States of Europe, are apt to turn men's minds to the study of political problems," he begins. "Like everyone else, I have felt all the prickings of curiosity to which our restless modern world gives rise." *Unlike* most everyone else, however, Gobineau's response to these "prickings" was not simply to interpret social and political reality and, in so doing, "regain an understanding of the meaning of human existence in the given conditions of the world." It was not simply to "perceive the order of being and attune himself to it." Rather, it was to follow in the footsteps of his philosophical mentor, Hegel, and engage in an intellectual swindle by casting not "Geist" but *race* as the prime mover of everything that 'in the final analysis' happens on the world-stage. As Gobineau writes:

> …passing from one induction to another, I was gradually penetrated by the conviction that the racial question *over-shadows all other problems of history*, *that it holds the key to them all, and that the inequality of the races from whose fusion a people is formed is enough to explain the whole course of its destiny*.[563]

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[562] Eric Voegelin, "Growth of the Race Idea" in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 10: Published Essays: 1940-1952*, ed. by Ellis Sandoz (University of Missouri Press, 2000), 42. In this essay, Voegelin identifies Gustav Klemm's General Cultural History of Mankind to Arthur de Gobineau's Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races as foundational works in the study of history from a racialist point of view and observes that, "From the context of the two authors it is clear not only that the facts of ancient history induced them to develop this set of theses but that the revolutionary events since 1789 with their egalitarian tendencies were decisive in forming the picture. The leveling down of the society of the ancient régime to a bourgeois type of society and the partial extermination of the French aristocracy during the terror period were the most important object lessons for designing a trend that leads from the conquest period of the fourth and fifth centuries through the symbiosis of the Middle Ages to the revolutionary amalgamation. The ethical and metaphysical evaluation of the process depended, therefore, entirely on the attitude of the scholars. There is no inevitable argument arising out of the facts."

[563] Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races*, xiv (emphasis mine).

In a letter to Tocqueville dated November 29, 1856, Gobineau reveals that although now a devout Catholic, he used to be a "rationalist, a Hegelian, an atheist"— "never afraid to go to the very end of the road."[564] As evidenced by the above passage, however, despite his claim to be Catholic he is still very much a rationalist, a Hegelian, even if he no longer considers himself one. For despite claiming to have broken with Hegelianism, Gobineau's definitive law of history nevertheless still parallels that of Hegel: "one common phenomenon, akin in his system to Hegel's Spirit, ties together the whole story of mankind, giving it a beginning a middle, and presumably an end." Just as class or "economic relations" or "class" take the place of Geist for Marx, so "Race takes the place of Geist" for Gobineau.[565]

Sadly, Gobineau's conviction that race is the master-key to history is a conviction that, no matter what Tocqueville tells him, he simply will not relinquish. Indeed, not even by pointing out the blatant contradiction between Gobineau's own professed Catholicism, on the one hand, and his racialism, on the other, can Tocqueville persuade his friend to rethink the flawed theoretical foundations on which his philosophy of history is predicated. In a letter dated July 30, 1856, Tocqueville tells Gobineau that "despite the pat on the back [he] gives to the Church," the "very essence" of his doctrines are hostile to it: whereas the Church teaches that all men—regardless of their race—are created equal, the *Essai* teaches the exact opposite. But for Gobineau, there simply is no contradiction between what the Church teaches, on the one hand, and what the *Essai*

[564] Gobineau to Tocqueville, November 29, 1856, *Correspondence*, 298.
[565] Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, 93.

"demonstrates," on the other. In a letter dated November 29, 1856, he responds that "if he ever thought," like Tocqueville, that his Catholicism was "incompatible" with his "historical philosophy," he would "immediately abandon" the latter.

Of course, Gobineau never explains *how* his "historical philosophy" comports with his self-professed Catholicism. Instead, he leaves that to Tocqueville to figure out for himself.[566] For our purposes, however, it is important simply to note the following: Gobineau's refusal to acknowledge what from the perspective of Tocqueville is obvious is *not just* indicative of a stubborn unwillingness, on his part, to concede Tocqueville's point (ie. of an emotional attachment to his own opinions). As Voegelin points out, that kind of stubbornness existed in antiquity as well and, although similar, thinkers like Gobineau are not simply the modern equivalent of a Thrasymachus or Callicles.[567] Rather, Gobineau's refusal to acknowledge what from the perspective of Tocqueville is obvious is indicative of the fact that what presents itself as (and otherwise *reads like*) a rational exchange between him and Tocqueville is in fact a debate between Tocqueville and an ideologist, a gnostic intellectual who claims knowledge of a sort that is *beyond critical reflection* (ie. beyond questioning). For Gobineau, his exchange with Tocqueville is not just about winning argument. It is not just about shame and honor He is "*mathematically certain about the correctitude of [his] propositions*."[568]

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[566] Tocqueville to Gobineau, January 14, 1857, *Correspondence*, 306. In this letter, Tocqueville responds to Gobineau's claim that his faith is perfectly compatible with his philosophy of history by writing the following: "You tell me that I am in error that you have become an absolutely convinced Christian. May Heaven hear you! You will be the happiest man in this world, not to speak of the one hereafter; of this I am profoundly convinced, and you may be certain that no one will rejoice more in seeing you persevere along this road than I. Alas! It is not a road open to every mind; many who are sincerely searching for it did not yet have the good fortune of finding it."

[567] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism,* 16.

[568] Gobineau to Tocqueville, January 8, 1855, *Correspondence*, 249-250.

In a letter dated August 8, 1843—nearly a decade before he received a copy of the *Essai* —Tocqueville tells Gobineau that he wonders whether, despite having "a broad knowledge, high intelligence," and "the best of manners," the latter will nevertheless succumb—like so many from his generation—to "the contagious diseases" of the century which, in turn, will render these qualities "useless." "In this way," he tells Gobineau, "you are interesting for what you could be, and also for what one fears you might become."[569] Fast forward 16 years and Tocqueville, it is safe to say, is no longer wondering. In a letter dated January 24, 1857, he resigns himself to the fact that insofar as at least 2 out of 3 of those qualities have apparently been rendered useless, to continue his debate with Gobineau would at best be a waste of time. As Tocqueville writes:

> I ask you to permit, my dear friend, to discuss your political theories no longer…I must admit that I am not very successful with you. Since I have known you, your temperament has always seemed independent…But, seriously, where can our political discussions lead us? We belong to two diametrically opposed orbits. Thus we cannot hope to convince each other. Now when one deals with grave questions and with new ideas one should not discuss them with one's friends when one has no hope of persuading them. *Each of us is perfectly logical in his own mode of thinking*. You consider people today as if they were overgrown children, very degenerate and very ill-educated. And, consequently, it seems proper to you that they should be led with blinds, through noise, with a great clangor of bells, in nicely embroidered uniforms, which are often but liveries of servants. I too, believe that our contemporaries are been badly brought up and this is a prime cause of their miseries and of their weakness, but I believe that a better upbringing could repair the wrongs done by their miseducation; I believe that it is not permissible to renounce such an effort. I believe that that one could still achieve something with our contemporaries, as with all men, through an able appeal to their natural decency and common sense. *In brief, I wish to treat them like human beings*.[570]

In an astonishing moment of clarity, Tocqueville tells Gobineau that there is no longer any point to discussing the latter's *Essai*—that he no longer wants to discuss the latter's "political theories." Why? Because in keeping what Voegelin describes above, he has come to the realization that his exchange with Gobineau has, from the outset, been

[569] Tocqueville to Gobineau, August 8, 1843, *Correspondence*, 188-189.
[570] Tocqueville to Gobineau, January 24, 1857, *Correspondence*, 308-309.

"disturbed by a profound difference of attitude with regard to all fundamental questions of human existence." Indeed, Tocqueville all but says as much when he writes that despite belonging to two diametrically opposed orbits, both he and Gobineau are *perfectly logical* in their own mode of thinking. In Gobineau's orbit and corresponding mode of thinking, reality is relatively simple. It can be explained, in its entirety, by focusing on the determining influence of a single general cause (race), and thus by either omitting or disingenuously subordinating *to it* all of the secondary causes that in democratic centuries, remain more hidden and difficult to disentangle from one another. In Tocqueville's orbit and corresponding mode of thinking, however, reality is never this simple because general causes, like general ideas, are proof only of the *weakness* of human reason in the world, never its strength. For him, race is not only an inherently flawed concept, but also, one general cause among thousands of other general and secondary causes that, in order to produce a theoretical ly valid—not to say complete—account of historical change, need to be carefully analyzed and disentangled from one another. In effect, while Gobineau will never convince Tocqueville of the simplicity of the world and, more specifically, of the validity of his absolute historical system, Tocqueville will never convince Gobineau of the complexity of the world and, as a result, of the limits of human—and in particular, his own—reason. That they have no shared understanding of the nature of man, his place in the world, or his place in society and history, means that constructive debate between them is simply impossible. Their argument will never achieve results and, ultimately, never does.

## FROM THE ECLIPSE REALITY TO THE ECLIPSE OF FREE WILL AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY: TOCQUEVILLE ON THE "PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES" OF HISTORICAL DETERMINISM, PART 1

In the introduction to his book *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, Isaiah Berlin responds to several critics who accuse him of conflating "fatalism" with "determinism" in his essay "Historical Inevitability." According to Berlin, he has not conflated fatalism with determinism; he has merely pointed out that when it comes to the question of whether human beings have free will and, as a result, *are morally responsible for their actions*, fatalism and determinism are one in the same. As he defines it, "fatalism is the view that human decisions are mere by-products, epiphenomena, incapable of influencing events which take their inscrutable course independently of human wishes." This is a view that, according to him, he has never "attributed" to any of his opponents; it is a view, he readily concedes, that is "implausible."[571] Determinism, on the other hand, is "the doctrine according to which men's characters and 'personality structures' and the emotions, attitudes, choices, decisions and acts that flow from them do indeed play a full part in what occurs, but are themselves results of causes, psychical and physical, social and individual, which in turn are effects of other causes, and so on, in unbreakable sequence."[572] It is a doctrine that, rather than reduce human decisions to mere epiphenomena reduces them instead to effects of prior causes. It is a doctrine that in his view is entirely plausible. Still, according to Berlin, to distinguish between fatalism and determinism—that is, at least when it comes to the question of free will and moral

[571] Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 7.
[572] Berlin, 7.

responsibility—is in actuality to make a distinction without a difference; in a lengthy passage in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Immanuel Kant makes this abundantly clear:

> If I say of a human being who commits a theft that this deed is, in accordance with the natural law of causality, a necessary result of determining grounds in preceding time, then it was impossible that it could have been left undone; how, then, can appraisal in accordance with the moral law make any change in it and suppose that it could have been omitted because the law says that it ought to have been omitted? That is, how can that man be called quite free at the same point of time and in regard to the same action in which and in regard to which he is nevertheless subject to an unavoidable natural necessity? It is a wretched subterfuge to seek to evade this by saying that the kind of determining grounds of his causality in accordance with natural law agrees with a comparative concept of freedom (according to which that is sometimes called a free effect, the determining natural ground of which lies within the acting being, e.g., that which a projectile accomplishes when it is in free motion, in which case one uses the word "freedom" because while it is in flight it is not impelled from without; or as we also call the motion of a clock a free motion because it moves the hands itself, which therefore do not need to be pushed externally; in the same way the actions of the human being, although they are necessary by their determining grounds which preceded them in time, are yet called free because the actions are caused from within, by representations produced by our own powers, whereby desires are evoked on occasion of circumstances and hence actions are produced at our own discretion). Some still let themselves be put off by this subterfuge and so think they have solved, with a little quibbling about words, that difficult problem on the solution of which millennia have worked in vain and which can therefore hardly be found so completely on the surface.[573]

Here, Kant exposes the fallacy of what Berlin calls "soft determinism" and what many today refer to as "compatibilism"—a philosophical position initially advanced by Hobbes and Hume (but that remains popular to this day), which essentially holds that freedom and necessity are entirely compatible provided that by freedom is meant nothing other than the absence of external impediments.[574] According to Kant, "some" people are perfectly happy to accept this "wretched subterfuge" of a doctrine. After all, it allows them to "think they have solved, with a little quibbling about words," what so many

[573] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. and trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press), 78.
[574] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXI.1-4; David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Stephen Buckle (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 8.23. More a more recent defense of this position, see Daniel C. Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Oxford University Press, 1984).

others have tried in vain to solve. As Kant also points out, however, this doctrine does not so much reconcile freedom with necessity as it does redefine freedom in such a way as to subordinate the former to the latter. It does not actually solve what is commonly referred to as the "free will problem;" it simply evades it by engaging in semantics.

With this, Berlin seems to agree. Although some people are happy to accept this "wretched subterfuge" of a doctrine, others are not, and he is one of them. As he explains:

> I have, in these essays, made no systematic attempt to discuss the problem of free will as such; my focus is on its relevance to the idea of causality in history. Here I can only restate my original thesis that it seems to me *patently inconsistent* to assert, on the one hand, that all events are wholly determined to be what they are by other events (whatever the status of this proposition), and, on the other, that men are free to choose between at least two possible courses of action - free not merely in the sense of being able to do what they choose to do (and because they choose to do it), *but in the sense of not being determined to choose what they choose by causes outside their control*. If it is held that every act of will or choice is fully determined by its respective antecedents, then (despite all that has been said against this) it still seems to me that this belief is incompatible with the notion of choice held by ordinary men, and by philosophers when they are not consciously defending a determinist position.[575]

Here, Berlin restates the central argument of his essay "Historical Inevitability": that it is "patently inconsistent to assert on the one hand, that events are wholly determined to be what they are by other events" (whether those events be psychological, physiological, social or individual in nature), and to believe "on the other hand, that men are free not merely in the sense of being able to do what they choose to do (and because they choose to do it), but in the sense of not being determined to choose what they choose by causes outside their control." Again, commonly referred to as the "free will" problem, this is a problem that, as Berlin observes, has plagued the human mind for "millennia." It is a problem that from a purely philosophical standpoint is essentially insoluble because

[575] Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, 5.

whatever solution one advances, it will necessarily fail to adequately reconcile what, on the one hand, most human beings in most times and places take for granted in their ordinary discourse (freedom of choice understood in the Kantian or "libertarian" sense), and what, on the other hand, nevertheless presents itself to the human mind as being *entirely* determined by antecedent causes (the material world in human beings are part of and inhabit).[576] Consequently, in Berlin's view even the softest of soft determinists fail to solve the free will problem; for as soon as one asserts that history, like nature, is determined, it no longer makes any sense to think of human beings as self-legislating, autonomous ends-in-themselves.

So it follows that for Berlin it does not matter whether a given philosophy of history is "teleological, metaphysical, mechanistic, religious, aesthetic or scientific" in orientation. It does not matter if it is that of Augustine, Bossuet, Turgot, Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Comte, Hegel, Marx or as he later points out, Gobineau.[577] That all are, "in one sense or another, forms of determinism," means that common to all is the following "implication":

> that the individual's freedom of choice…is ultimately an illusion, that the notion that human beings could have chosen otherwise than they did usually rests upon ignorance of facts, with the consequence that any assertion that they should have acted thus or thus, might have avoided this or that, and deserve (and not merely elicit or respond to) praise or blame, approval or condemnation, rests upon the presupposition that some area, at any rate, of their lives is not determined by laws, whether metaphysical or theological or expressing the generalized probabilities of the sciences.[578]

As Berlin here explains, in his view the philosophy of history, whatever its form, is essentially antithetical to the inextricably connected notions of free will and moral

[576] Berlin, 11.
[577] Berlin, 100.
[578] Berlin, 110.

responsibility. For as he points out, to start from the premise that history is governed by laws, "whether metaphysical or theological or expressing the generalized probabilities of the sciences," is also to start from the premise that conventional opinions regarding the theoretical status of free will and moral responsibility are products of ignorance as opposed to knowledge. Put another way, to start from the premise that history is governed by ineluctable laws (whether natural or divine) is to assume that human beings are for the most part simply *confused* about their agency. They may *think* of themselves as being "free to choose" and thus deserving of either praise or blame for their actions. But because what they "choose" is, in actuality, no less determined by historical "laws" than the material world is by gravity, they are no more deserving of either praise or blame than a "stone" falling to the ground.[579]

Now, Berlin readily admits that in writing "Historical Inevitability," it was never his intention to either refute determinism or prove that free will is more than just an illusion (ie. that the "liberty of the will," as Mill calls it, is as real as both ordinary men and certain philosophers believe it to be).[580] He recognizes full well that just as he could never definitely prove the existence of the latter, he could never definitely refute the often taken-for-granted theoretical infallibility of the former. But for Berlin, this does not really matter. What matters for him is what, coincidentally enough, matters for Tocqueville: *the connection between* the presumed infallibility determinism, on the one hand, and its "practical consequences" on the other; the connection between absolute historical

[579] Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 27.
[580] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism, and Other Essays*, ed. Mark Philp and Frederick Rosen (Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

systems, on the one hand, and their effect on the moral and political psychology of those who treat them as gospel truth, on the other.

As discussed at length in Chapter 2, historians in democratic centuries exhibit certain methodological tendencies that, taken together, make them especially prone to eliminate the phenomenon of accident from human affairs—to make history, in its entirety, a function of necessity. These include focusing on the influence of general causes over and against the influence of individuals; creating historical systems; and finally, furnishing those systems with a single "motor" or "superior force"—what Tocqueville identifies as either an "inflexible providence" or "blind fatality"—that dominates entire societies without their knowing it. As Tocqueville later reveals, however, precisely because these tendencies make them prone to eliminate the phenomenon of accident of chance from human affairs—precisely because they make them prone to attribute everything to "necessity"—democratic historians are liable to teach a "doctrine of fatality" (of historical inevitability, as Berlin calls it) which, if not explicitly then at the very least *implicitly* denies the existence of free will and therewith it, moral responsibility. As Tocqueville explains:

> It seems, while reading the historians of aristocratic ages and particularly those of antiquity, that, in order to become master of his fate and govern his fellows, man has only to know how to control himself. You would say, while surveying the histories written in our time, that man can do nothing, either for himself or around him. The historians of antiquity taught how to command; those of our days scarcely teach anything except how to obey. In their writings, the author often appears great, but humanity is always small.
>
> If this doctrine of fatality, which is so attractive to those who write history in democratic times, were to spread from writers to readers and thereby infiltrate the citizen en masse and take hold of the public mind, it would soon paralyze the new societies and reduce Christians to Turks.
>
> *I will say, moreover, that such a doctrine is particularly dangerous in this period in which we live; our contemporaries are all too inclined to doubt free will…*[581]

[581] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 858.

By contrasting "Christians" with "Turks," Tocqueville is almost certainly cribbing Montesquieu who, in Volume Two, Book XXIV of the *Spirit of the Laws* explains that in his view "a moderate Government is most agreeable to the Christian Religion, and a despotic Government to the Mahometan" (more on this below). For now, however, it is important simply to note that in this passage, Tocqueville reveals the reason for including a chapter on historians in democratic centuries in *Democracy in America* in the first place: yes, their methodological tendencies differ from those of their aristocratic counterparts. The problem, however, lies not simply in this difference, but also, in *how* this difference is liable to affect the moral and political psychology of those who read history. Additionally problematic is how this difference relates to the "public mind."

By virtue of their tendency to focus on the influence of individuals to the exclusion of general causes, aristocratic historians teach what might be called a "doctrine of virtue"—a doctrine which holds that because man has free will, he is capable of doing much for both himself and for what is "around him." It is a doctrine that Machiavelli not only calls to our attention but himself teaches when, in Chapters 14 and 25 of the *Prince*, he advises us to "read histories and consider in them the actions of excellent men" so that we might ourselves become, like these excellent men, better equipped to deal with the vagaries of "fortune."[582] By contrast, because democratic historians deny that fortune exists (because they believe that everything is governed by some necessity) they teach a "doctrine of fatality": a doctrine which holds that man "can do nothing, either for himself or around him." It is a doctrine that Machiavelli explicitly rejects when at the beginning

[582] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 60; 98.

of Chapter 25 of the *Prince*, he declares that those who believe "the opinion that worldly things are so governed by fortune and by God…" are only half right—that, for the sake of preserving "free will," it is better to believe that "that fortune is arbiter of only half of our actions…"[583]

Of course, where Tocqueville employs the language of providence and fate, Machiavelli employs the language of fortune and God. But when it comes to the question of the existence of "free will"—of human freedom understood in the Kantian or "libertarian" sense of the term—this distinction comes into view again, as being a distinction without a difference. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 2, whether one calls it providence, chance, necessity, fate, or Jupiter, the fact remains: unless one (like Machiavelli above) specifically carves out or affirms the existence of a realm of human life that is not totally determined by natural or theological laws, then the notion that human beings are "free to choose" and by extension, responsible for their actions, remains at best an edifying myth.

Not surprisingly, therefore, in his correspondence with Gobineau, Tocqueville is quick to criticize him not only for claiming to know what no human being, no matter how perceptive, could possibly know, but also, for failing to recognize that *precisely by* claiming to know what no human being could possibly know, he is inadvertently teaching his readers a doctrine of fatality of the kind that Tocqueville discusses in *Democracy in America*. "Your doctrine," he writes in his letter of November 17, 1853, is…

> …rather a sort of fatalism, of predestination if you wish but, at any rate, very different from that of St. Augustine, from the Jansenists, and from the Calvinists (the very last are closest to your doctrines), since you tie predestination and matter closely together. You continually speak about races regenerating and degenerating, losing or acquiring through

[583] Machiavelli, 98.

> the infusion of new blood social capacities which they have not previously had. (I think these are your own words). I must frankly say that, to me, this sort of predestination is a close relative to the purest materialism.[584]

As Tocqueville here explains, despite presenting itself as "scientific," Gobineau's philosophy of history is nevertheless somehow reminiscent of the theological concept of predestination—and for good reason: like his progressive rivals (and according to Voegelin, Calvin before them), Gobineau does not so much disavow this concept as he does *immanentize* it.[585] At the beginning of the *Essai*, Gobineau rejects the orthodox position on providence thereby appearing to *separate* his philosophy of history from the theological concept of predestination. Although he concedes that the ancients, for all of their faults, managed to discover "one fundamental axiom" to which "we must adhere"—namely, that the "finger of God" conducts "the world"—he is also quick to point out that the wisdom of the ancients "tells us *nothing definite* as to the ways in which the Divine Will moves in order to compass the death of peoples; it is, on the contrary, driven to consider these ways as essentially mysterious."[586] As fundamental as this "axiom" may be, then, it is a dead-end when it comes to making sense of the chaos characteristic of history. This is something which can only be done by taking the following, emphatically modern view: that the "heavy hand of God" operates according "to rule and foreknowledge, *by virtue of fixed edicts, inscribed in the code of the universe by the side of other laws which, in their rigid severity, govern organic and inorganic nature alike*."[587] Accordingly, in his search for the motor of history, Gobineau begins from the

[584] Tocqueville to Gobineau, November 17, 1853, *Correspondence*, 227.
[585] Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 22: History of Political Ideals: Volume 4*, ed. by David L. Morse and William M. Thompson (University of Missouri Press, 1998), 289.
[586] Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races*, 3.
[587] Gobineau, 4.

same premise that any other democratic historian begins: that the heavy hand of God is knowable by means of human reason alone; that by doing in the realm of history what has already been done in the realm of natural philosophy, we can demystify that which for the "ancients" remained mysterious. Yet, as Tocqueville here brings to light, that Gobineau rejects the orthodox position on providence does not mean that his philosophy of history is any less fatalistic or necessitarian than the most fatalistic or necessitarian forms of predestination (and hence the most fatalistic of theodicies). Rather, it is just as 'necessitarian' because like them it is predicated on a claim to knowledge (*gnosis*) that Gobineau, like any other gnostic thinker whose goal is to demonstrate his absolute cognitive mastery over reality, simply cannot substantiate.

Immediately after telling Gobineau that his doctrine is a "sort of fatalism," Tocqueville distinguishes between its theoretical status, on the one hand, and what he calls its "practical consequences," on the other. As he explains:

> Whether the element of fatality should be introduced into the material order of things, or whether God willed to make different kinds of men so that He imposed special burdens of race on some, withholding from them a capacity for certain feelings, for certain thoughts, for certain habits, for certain qualities—*all this has nothing to do with my own concern with the practical consequences of these philosophical doctrines*. *The consequence of both theories is that of a vast limitation, if not the complete abolition, of human freedom*.
>
> Thus I confess that after having read your book I remain, as before, opposed in the extreme to your doctrines. I believe that they are probably quite false, I know that they are certainly very pernicious.[588]

In this passage, Tocqueville seems to suggest that regardless of whether Gobineau's doctrine is from a purely theoretical perspective, worthy of consideration, what matters are its "practical consequences." Even if the "element of fatality" should, he explains, apply to the various races that makeup mankind, the fact remains: insofar as this element

[588] Tocqueville to Gobineau, November 17, 1853, *Correspondence*, 227.

of fatality would vastly limit, if not completely abolish, human freedom, he remains opposed to it. He therefore echoes a point he makes in *Democracy in America* when he writes that "*even if*" it was to be discovered that a single, "general fact" controlled the wills of "all individuals," this would not save "human freedom."[589]

To be sure, this concern with "practical consequences," regardless of the truth, has led some scholars (in keeping with none other than Gobineau himself) to argue that Tocqueville is, in his heart of hearts, a moralist—a man concerned primarily, if not exclusively, with what is useful rather than what is true, practice rather than theory (more on this in Chapter 5).[590] Still, it is important to recognize that for Tocqueville, practical consequences, whether pernicious or benevolent, are not so much separate from as they are *inextricably connected to* the "philosophical merits of an idea" (ie. to its theoretical status). Let us recall that in his speech to the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in 1852, Tocqueville admonishes those who "recognize in politics nothing but practice." According to him, they are "barbarians"—too obtuse to recognize that it is not political men, but rather, those who take the "*least part in public affairs*," those who concern themselves with the most "*abstract science*," who are the *real* movers and shakers of history. For as Tocqueville explains, these men "do everywhere and always, though more secretly and slowly," what they did in 1789: give birth, not only to the "general ideas from which then emerge the particular facts in whose midst men of politics busy

[589] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 857.
[590] See, for instance, Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, 147-158. As Jaume argues, "Tocqueville the moralist addressed himself to legislators and reformers. Helvétius's definition applies: 'Moralists devote themselves to the study of the use that can be made of rewards [and punishments], and of how these can help to couple individual interest to the general interest. To achieve such a union is the ultimate goal that the moralist should set for himself.' This definition nicely captures the heart of Tocqueville's concern with what he called democracy" (147).

themselves," but also, "the laws" that political men "*believe*" they are responsible for inventing.[591] Consequently, for Tocqueville, the practical consequences of Gobineau's doctrine, like the practical consequences of determinism in general, stem *precisely from* its presumptive status as a theoretical lys infallible (ie. absolute) system.

As discussed above, for Tocqueville there are certain limits to what human beings can know. Not only has no human being ever grasped the "truth itself," no human being, in his view, ever will. Human beings can be lovers of wisdom, but they cannot themselves be wise. And yet, as we have seen, democratic historians for whom showing how facts happened is "not enough" are in effect claiming to be wise nonetheless. As a result, in Tocqueville's view these historians are not just propagating "certain untruth" at the expense of pursuing "uncertain truth," but inasmuch as they are, propagating *totalitarian doctrines* that pose a real threat to the preservation of liberty and human dignity in a democratic age. Indeed, as he explains:

> …every man who presents a complete and absolute system, by the sole fact that his system is complete and absolute, is almost certainly in a state of error or falsehood, and…every man who wants to impose such a system on his fellows by force must *ipso facto* and without preliminary examination of his ideas be considered as a tyrant and an enemy of the human species.[592]

Here, Toccuqueville reveals that the theoretical hubris characteristic of democratic historians like Gobineau is much more dangerous than meets the eye—that their pathological desire to claim absolute cognitive mastery over reality can have very real, very practical consequences. It is not simply that these historians are "almost certainly in a state of error or falsehood;" it is that precisely by being in this state, they pose a

[591] Tocqueville, "Speech Given to the Annual Public Meeting of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences on April 3, 1852," 20.
[592] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 715. See note "f."

significant threat to the human species. Yes, they teach a doctrine of fatality which denies the existence of free will and moral responsibility. However, their teaching of this doctrine is actually the *product of* their theoretical overreach, not incidental to it. It is not simply, then, that Gobineau's theory of historical inevitability, regardless of whether it is true or untrue, *happens* to have pernicious, practical consequences. It is that Gobineau's theory of historical inevitability has "pernicious" practical consequences *precisely because* it is "probably quite false."

In his reflections on materialism in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville admits that while there are many things he finds offensive about the materialists, it is their "pride" that revolts him most. "When they believe that they have sufficiently established that men are only brutes," he writes, "they appear as proud as if they demonstrated that men are gods." At first, this may seem like a contradiction. How can they establish that men are brutes while simultaneously demonstrating that men are gods? If we refer back to what Tocqueville says about the nature of man in his discussion of poetry, however, what at first might seem like a contradiction not only comes into view as being consistent, but applicable to democratic historians, as well.

As we saw above, near the end of his chapter on poetry Tocqueville argues that man is unique in that unlike either the animals or God, he must rely on his imagination to complete a picture of himself that would otherwise remain incomplete. From the perspective of materialists, however, Tocqueville has it wrong. In their view, there is no picture for man to complete because as it turns out, man is no different from the animals after all. Accordingly, just as God can see himself clearly, so too can man. *He need only relinquish the illusion that he somehow differs from the brutes to begin with*. He need

only become *clear-sighted* about the fact that his existence in space is no less determined than *any other* beast who has "deliberation."[593]

With this, democratic historians essentially agree—albeit as it relates to man's existence in time as opposed to his existence in space. They too agree that Tocqueville's characterization of man as a being who, given his theoretical limits, must rely on his imagination to complete a picture of himself that would otherwise remain incomplete, is wrong. They too believe that contrary to what Tocqueville posits, man can see himself clearly. The only difference is that whereas materialists challenge Tocqueville's characterization of man by arguing that human beings are no different from brutes to begin with, democratic historians challenge it by arguing that otherwise free, morally responsible human beings are in fact no different than "earthquakes, sunsets, oceans, [or] mountains; we may admire or fear them, welcome or curse them, but to denounce or extol their acts is (ultimately) as sensible as addressing sermons to a tree."[594] As a result, whereas for materialists, man need only become clear-sighted about the fact that his existence in space is no less determined than that of any other beast who has "deliberation," for democratic historians, man need only become clear-sighted about the fact that his existence in time is no less determined by what Tocqueville calls "general and eternal laws" than his existence in space. He need only relinquish the illusion that history, no less than nature, is also determined.

It is ultimately for this reason, then, that "in their writings," democratic historians appear "great" but humanity always appears "small." For just as the materialist, on

[593] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, VI.53.
[594] Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, 116.

account of his theoretical ambition to see man as God sees himself, must eclipse reality by replacing it with an absolute system that in effect reduces human beings to brutes, so the democratic historian, on account of his ambition not just to recount "how facts happened, but how they could not have happened otherwise," must eclipse reality by replacing it with an absolute system that reduces otherwise free, morally responsible human beings to the playthings of a superior force. Either way, human beings are not what they intuitively feel or perceive themselves to be. Despite feeling free, they are not the authors of their actions and therefore despite feeling responsible, they are not actually deserving of either praise or blame for what they do. Kant, it turns out, has it backwards: human beings are not so much autonomous self-legislating "ends in themselves" as they are the means to the end of history.[595]

## FROM THE ECLIPSE OF FREE WILL AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY TO THE ECLIPSE OF LIBERTY AND HUMAN DIGNITY: TOCQUEVILLE ON THE "PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES" OF HISTORICAL DETERMINISM, PART 2

As noted above, in explaining why democratic historians are liable to teach a "doctrine of fatality" that, if not explicitly, then at the very least implicitly denies the existence of free will and therewith it, moral responsibility, Tocqueville makes a rather peculiar and, by today's standards, obviously politically incorrect statement concerning what he fears will happen if such a doctrine "were to spread from writers to readers" and "take hold of the public mind." According to Tocqueville, if such a doctrine were ever to

[595] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor and Jans Timmermann (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 85; 121. As Kant puts it, "Beings whose existence rests not indeed on our will but on nature, if they are nonrational beings, still have only a relative worth, as means, and are therefore called things, whereas rational beings are called persons, because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves…"

infiltrate the "citizenry en masse," it would "soon paralyze the new societies and reduce Christians to Turks."[596]

Naturally, this statement might incline readers to conclude what some scholars already do: that Tocqueville, like so many French intellectuals during the 18th and 19th century, is an Orientalist; that he regards the despotic, predominantly Muslim East as being inherently inferior to the free, predominantly Christian West.[597] Important to keep in mind, however, is that as politically incorrect—as "Orientalist"—as this statement may today read, its purpose is not so much to extol Christianity and denigrate Islam for their relative compatibility and incompatibility with liberty and human dignity, respectively. Rather, its purpose is to bring to light something that is perhaps best articulated by Isaiah Berlin who, in the midst of responding to his aforementioned critics, also happens to write the following:

> There are remedies that breed new diseases, whether or not they cure those to which they are applied. To frighten human beings by suggesting to them that they are in the grip of impersonal forces over which they have little or no control is to breed myths, ostensibly in order to kill other figments—the notion of supernatural forces, or of all-powerful individuals, or of the invisible hand. It is to invent entities, to propagate faith in unalterable patterns of events for which the empirical evidence is, to say the least insufficient, and which by relieving individuals of the burdens of personal responsibility breeds *irrational passivity* in some, and no less *irrational fanatical activity* in others; for nothing is more inspiring than the certainty that the stars in their courses are fighting for one's cause, that 'History', or 'social forces', or 'the wave of the future' are with one, bearing one aloft and forward.[598]

Here, Berlin reveals what might be called the practical consequences of the practical consequences of historical determinism—that is, the practical consequences of designing

[596] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 858.
[597] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin, 2003), 41–42; 95; Michael Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 139–76.
[598] Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, 27.

absolute historical systems that, if not explicitly then at the very least implicitly deny the existence of free will and therewith it, moral responsibility. At first, systems such as these—regardless of their theoretical status—might be said to have a *salutary* effect on the "public mind." For like determinism more generally, they may very well serve to moderate the moralism of human beings whose first impulse is to exact revenge on others for having either trespassed against them or transgressed a law, whether civil or divine. Accordingly, systems such as these may very well be said to remedy what Thomas Hobbes's own gnostic construction is by his own admission designed to remedy: the old disease of spiritedness (*thymos*)—the pride and corresponding "rage" of men like Achilles. Yet as Berlin here points out, there is nevertheless such a thing as remedies that breed new diseases and absolute historical systems—whatever salutary effect they might have on some—are case in point. By "relieving individuals of the burdens of personal responsibility" these systems, he observes, are not just liable to moderate the irrational moralism of otherwise vainglorious human beings, but also to transform otherwise moderate human beings into irrationally passive or, paradoxically, irrationally fanatical ones—which is essentially what Tocqueville means when he says that if a doctrine of fatality were ever to infiltrate the "citizenry en masse," it would "soon paralyze the new societies and reduce Christians to Turks."

In an editorial note to this passage, Tocqueville reveals that by the term "Turks" he is referring to specifically to a religious dogma that Montesquieu—the third thinker with whom he apparently lived a little "every day"—briefly discusses in *The Spirit of the*

*Laws*.[599] In Book 24, Montesquieu analyzes the relationship between a nation's laws and its religion and in Chapter 14, observes that "*when religion establishes the dogma of the necessity of human actions*," it is liable to breed what he calls "laziness of soul." As an example, one need only consider "the Mohammedan dogma of predestination": because this dogma, explains Montesquieu, posits that whatever happens in the world has been "decreed by god," it encourages human beings to "rest"—to remain idle because *que sera sera*: whatever will be will be.[600] It encourages human beings to behave as the Turks, for instance, behave when it comes to fighting the spread of disease.[601] On the other hand and, as Montesquieu later intimates, for the very same reason that this dogma is liable to breed "laziness of soul" it is, paradoxically, also liable to breed what might alternatively be called "zealousness of soul." For according to Montesquieu, just as the Mohammedan dogma of predestination encourages the Turks to remain irrationally passive when it comes to fighting the spread of disease, so it encourages them to become irrationally fanatical when it comes to fighting their idolatrous enemies.[602] Whereas in the case of the former, this dogma encourages them to conceive of themselves as the *collateral damage* of a natural phenomenon (a plague) that God, whether they like it or not, has set in

[599] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 858. See note "k."
[600] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. and trans. Anne M. Cohler (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 468.
[601] Montesquieu, 241. "The Turks," writes Montesquieu, "who have no policy on these matters, see Christians in the same town escape the danger and themselves alone perish. They buy the clothing of those stricken by the plague, wear it, and go their way. The doctrine of a rigid destiny ruling all makes the magistrate a tranquil spectator; he thinks that god has already done everything and that he himself has nothing to do."
[602] As Montesquieu elsewhere observes, "When an intellectual religion also gives us the idea of a choice made by the divinity, and of a distinction between those who profess it and those who do not profess it, this attaches us greatly to the religion. The Mohammedans would not be such good Muslims if there were not, on the one hand, idolatrous peoples who make them think they are avengers of the unity of god and, on the other, Christians, to make them believe that they are the object of his preference" (480).

motion, in the case the of the latter, it encourages them to conceive of themselves as the *dispensable means* of an imperial project that God, whether they like it or not, has summoned them to undertake.[603]

Now, given Montesquieu's single example of the "Mohammedan dogma of predestination," his brief discussion of "the dogma of the necessity of human actions" might also incline readers to conclude that, like Tocqueville, he too is an Orientalist—that he too regards the despotic, predominantly Muslim East as being inherently inferior to the free, predominantly Christian West. Yet, just as Tocqueville is not the Orientalist that some scholars consider him to be, neither is Montesquieu. To be sure, because he in no uncertain terms looks to the East and, more specifically, to Islam, to identify certain pathologies inimical to the preservation of liberty and human dignity, he is not without good reason exposed to the indictment. Yet, to write him off as an Orientalist would not only be to overlook the obvious fact that he is often *as critical* of the West as he is of the East, but also, to overlook the less obvious fact that upon turning his attention, however brief, to the "dogma of the necessity of human actions," he implicitly alludes to what he elsewhere makes explicit: that Christians, no less than Muslims are susceptible to believing in this dogma because Christians, no less than Turks, are susceptible to embracing a certain mode or way of thinking about causality in the world that *Abrahamic religions in general* have a tendency to foster.[604]

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[603] This is something that Tocqueville himself alludes to in Volume 1 of *Democracy in America*. In an editorial footnote to Part 1, Chapter 5, he writes that while the "Turkish populations have never taken any part in the direction of the affairs of society," they have, nevertheless, "accomplished immense things…as long as they saw the triumph of the religion of Mohammed in the conquests of the Sultan…" (158). See note "y."

[604] In Book 28, Chapter 17 of *Spirit in the Laws*, Montesquieu reveals—if only in passing—that the "dogma of the necessity of human actions" is a dogma that both the Turks and the Germans subscribe to. "As the

What is that mode of thinking? It is none other than the one that Machiavelli, in Chapter 25 of the *Prince*, refers to when, as we saw above, he declares that those of the opinion "that worldly things are so governed by fortune and by God…" are only half right; that, for the sake of preserving "free will," it is better to believe that "that fortune is arbiter of only half of our actions…" In this chapter, Machiavelli makes an implied attack on what Montesquieu identifies as the "Mohammedan dogma of predestination," on the one hand, and what Tocqueville, in his correspondence with Gobineau, identifies as the Calvinist dogma of predestination, on the other: forms of predestination which so abolish free will that those who subscribe to them, whether it be the Turks or the Calvinists, Muslims or Christians, no longer conceive of themselves as anything other than either the *collateral damage* or the *dispensable means* of a "superior force" beyond their control.

If we recall, in his letter of November 17, 1853, Tocqueville alludes to several different forms of predestination—some of which, he seems to suggest, are more compatible with free will than others. To begin, there is the predestination of Saint Augustine—a form of predestination that as we saw in Chapter 2, implicitly comes to the fore in Augustine's confrontation with Cicero over the Stoic doctrine of fate in Book 5 of the *City of God*. This is a form of predestination that presents itself as being entirely compatible with free will, if only because according to Augustine, Cicero has it wrong: "our wills are themselves included in the order of causes which is certain to God and contained within His foreknowledge."[605] Then there is the predestination of the

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Turks today in their civil wars regard first victory as a judgment of god who decides;" he writes, "so in their individual business the German peoples took the outcome of combat as a mandate of providence, ever mindful to punish the criminal or the usurper" (552).

[605] Augustine, *City of God*, 201–2.

"Jansenists"—a predestination that, in a letter to François de Corcelle in 1856, Tocqueville says is *already* too close "to the fatalism of the Ancients or the Muslims' belief in predestination."[606] It is a predestination that preserves little if any space for free will. Finally, there is the predestination of the Calvinists—a form of predestination that, like that of Gobineau's fatalism, has been immanentized and is therefore a "close relative" of the "purest materialism." It is a predestination that, in keeping with the fatalism of the Muslims, denies the existence of free will altogether.

Of course, whether any of these forms of predestination is *actually* compatible with free will, as Tocqueville seems to think, is a question that we shall revisit in Chapter 5. For now, however, we need only take note of the following: that insofar as Machiavelli is concerned with those who believe that "worldly things" are governed *entirely* by either fortune or God, he is referring specifically to a form of predestination that, in keeping with what Tocqueville and Montesquieu identify as the predestination of the Calvinists and Muslims, respectively, denies the existence of free will altogether, as well.

To be sure, the title of the chapter itself refers only to "how much *fortune* can do in human affairs…"; it refers only to the extent to which chance *as opposed* to God can be said to govern history. Still, as the chapter's first two sentences indicate, Machiavelli is at least as concerned with the power of the latter as he is with the power of the former (and thus with the extent to which an inflexible providence as opposed to a blind fatality might said to govern history, as well). "It is not unknown to me," he begins, "that many have held and hold the opinion that worldly things are so governed by fortune and by

[606] Alexis de Tocqueville, "Tocqueville to M. Corcelle, December 20, 1856," *OC XV Vol. 2*, ed. André Jardin (Gallimard, 1983), 192.

God, that men cannot correct them with their prudence, indeed that they have no remedy at all…"[607] The chapter's first sentence therefore serves to qualify its title: not only does it reveal that by "human things" Machiavelli actually means "worldly things," but also, that by "fortune" Machiavelli apparently also means "God"—the creator of *all things*, both human *and* non-human.[608] Then comes the second sentence, in which Machiavelli tells us that while many have "held" this opinion, he is nevertheless concerned, in particular, with those who hold it *"in our times"*.[609] According to Machiavelli, by "our times" he means times characterized by a "great variability of things…beyond every human conjecture."[610] But given what he writes at the very beginning of the *Discourses on Livy*, one cannot help but wonder whether by "our times" Machiavelli also means times characterized by *modern* as opposed to ancient things, and thus times characterized specifically by Christian as opposed ancient cosmological beliefs.[611] If so, then just as the first sentence of this chapter serves to qualify its title, so the second sentence of this chapter, it might be argued, serves to qualify its first: insofar as it reveals that Machiavelli is concerned in particular with what men *in modern times* believe, it also reveals that Machiavelli is as much concerned with the supposed omnipotence of a deity to whom men now daily pray (God) as he is with the supposed omnipotence of a deity to whom men—at least for the most part—no longer do (Fortune). What he therefore presents as a fundamental disagreement between him and the humanists over the power fortune in human affairs might also or at the same time be interpreted as an implied attack on the

[607] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 98.
[608] John T. Scott, *The Routledge Guidebook to Machiavelli's The Prince* (Routledge, 2016), 223.
[609] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 98.
[610] Machiavelli, 98.
[611] Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, I.1.2.

religious "dogma of the necessity of human actions" as identified by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws:* an attack on the notion that an "inflexible providence" as opposed to a "blind fatality" governs the world.

As discussed above, in *Democracy in America* Tocqueville makes it clear that inasmuch as this dogma—whether it is explicitly established by religion *or* implicitly propagated by democratic historians—denies the existence of free will and moral responsibility, he considers it to be politically dangerous: liable to reduce "Christians to Turks." Indeed, it is for precisely this reason that at the very end of *Democracy in America*, he calls doctrines which hold that peoples are "never masters of themselves…false and cowardly".[612] Interestingly, however, it is in his correspondence with Gobineau and the *Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, not in *Democracy in America,* that he provides the most compelling evidence to prove just how politically dangerous these doctrines can actually be. In a letter dated January 8, 1856, he writes the following:

> I continue having divided feelings about your work; I dislike the book, and I like the author; and I have trouble, at times, in balancing such opposite sentiments. What I disapprove of in the book I told you before: it is less the work itself than its tendency, which I consider dangerous. If we were to suffer from excessive enthusiasm and self-confidence, as did our ancestors of 1789, I would consider your book a salutary cold shower. But we have disgracefully become the extreme opposite. We have no regard for anything, beginning with ourselves; we have no faith in anything, including ourselves. A book which tries to prove that men in this world are merely obeying their physical constitutions and that their will power can do almost nothing to influence their destinies is like opium given to a patient whose blood has already weakened.[613]

This passage is important for two reasons, the first of which has to do with what it explicitly conveys: why, in a letter written to Gobineau three years prior, Tocqueville was so quick to disapprove of the *Essai* in the first place. According to Tocqueville, what he

[612] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1284.
[613] Tocqueville to Gobineau, January 8, 1856, *Correspondence*, 270.

disapproves of is the *Essai*'s thesis—a thesis that to him, seems "the most dangerous one for our times."[614] For just as the dogma of the necessity of human actions, according to Montesquieu, promotes a certain "laziness of soul," so the *Essai's* thesis (that individuals are nothing more or less than the blood in their veins), explains Tocqueville, promotes the "spiritual lassitude" of their already "weakening contemporaries." Insofar as it is a thesis that not only subordinates *but binds, in its entirety*, mind to matter, it is a thesis that, should it ever infiltrate the citizenry en masse, will make people all the more passive.[615] It is a thesis that threatens to do to entire societies what physicians who are "greatly mistaken in their prognostications," according to Tocqueville, do to their patients: "uselessly frighten and discourage them".[616]

The second reason that this passage is important is because of what it implicitly alludes to: that for the same reason the dogma of the necessity of human actions breeds irrational passivity in some, it breeds no less irrational fanatical activity in others; the "excessive enthusiasm and confidence" of Tocqueville's revolutionary ancestors prove as much. In the same letter in which Tocqueville explains why he was so quick to disapprove of Gobineau's thesis in the first place, he also expands on the comparison between their "ancestors of 1789" and their already "weakening contemporaries," introduced in the passage above. According to him,

> The last century had an exaggerated and somewhat childish trust in the control which men and peoples were supposed to have of their own destinies. It was the error of those times; a noble error, after all; it may have led to many follies, but is also produced great things, compared to which we shall seem quite small in the eyes of posterity. The weary aftermath of revolutions, the weakening of passions, the miscarriage of so many generous ideas and of so many great hopes have no led us to the opposite extreme. After having

[614] Tocqueville to Gobineau, December 20, 1853, *Correspondence*, 231.
[615] Tocqueville to Gobineau, December 20, 1853, *Correspondence*, 232.
[616] Tocqueville to Gobineau, July 30, 1856, *Correspondence*, 292.

> felt ourselves capable of transforming ourselves, we now feel incapable of reforming ourselves; after having had excessive pride, we have now fallen into excessive self-pity; we thought we could do everything and now we think we can do nothing.[617]

At first, Tocqueville appears to be comparing and contrasting the moral and political psychologies of those who read aristocratic versus democratic history, respectively. For as we saw above, whereas aristocratic history teaches people "how to command," democratic history teaches people "scarcely anything except how to obey." It would therefore make sense, upon reading this passage, to assume that when speaking of the "childish trust in the control that men and peoples were supposed to have over their own destinies," Tocqueville is referring, in particular, to a mindset characteristic of aristocratic man—a man for whom the influence of individuals who know "how to command" determines what happens on the world-stage. To assume this, however, would be mistaken. Interestingly, this passage has *nothing to do* with the psychology of aristocratic man. Rather, it has to do with the psychology of a generation of human beings who, despite their pride, nevertheless *also* believed in the dogma of the necessity of human actions, discussed above.

In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt documents the captivating influence of this dogma over the minds of Tocqueville's revolutionary "ancestors" by recounting a famous exchange between Louis XVI and the Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt at the very outset of the French revolution:

> The date was the night of the fourteenth of July 1789, in Paris, when Louis XVI heard from the Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt of the fall of the Bastille, the liberation of a few prisoners, and the defection of the royal troops before a popular attack. The famous dialogue that took place between the king and his messenger is very short and very revealing. The king, we are told, exclaimed, 'C'est une revolte', and Liancourt corrected him: 'Non, Sire, c'est une revolution.' Here we hear the word still, *and politically for the last time*, in the sense of the old metaphor which carries its meaning from the skies down

[617] Tocqueville to Gobineau, December 20, 1853, *Correspondence*, 231.

> to the earth; but here, for the first time perhaps, the emphasis has entirely shifted from the lawfulness of a rotating, cyclical movement to its irresistibility. The motion is still seen in the image of the movements of the stars, but what is stressed now is that it is beyond human power to arrest it, and hence it is a law unto itself. *The king, when he declared the storming of the Bastille was a revolt, asserted his power and the various means at his disposal to deal with conspiracy and defiance of authority; Liancourt replied that what had happened there was irrevocable and beyond the power of a king*.[618]

If we recall, at the very beginning of the *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville observes that while there is a great revolution taking place among us, it has essentially evoked two responses: some people, he writes, regard it as "new and, taking it for an accident, still hope to be able to stop it"; others view it is "irresistible, because it seems to them the most continuous, oldest and most permanent fact known in history."[619] Here, Arendt makes a similar observation—albeit in the context of the "fall of the Bastille" in particular as opposed to the arrival of democracy in general. As Arendt explains, from the perspective of Louis XVI, the fall of the Bastille was an accident, a function of chance—something that by exercising his power as a king, could not only be resisted but stopped. But from the perspective of Liancourt, the fall of the Bastille was irresistible—a function of necessity. Important to recognize, then, is that what Tocqueville calls the "excessive enthusiasm and self-confidence" of his ancestors had, ironically enough, less to do with some kind of aristocratic belief, on their part, in the power of individuals to control their own fate than it did with a wholly *democratic conviction*, on their part, in the insurmountable power of 'history' to dethrone kings. Their fanatical activity stemmed *precisely from* their belief in the dogma of the necessity of human actions.

[618] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin Books, 1990), 47-48 (emphasis mine).
[619] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 6.

Herein lies the paradox not only of the French revolutionaries, but also, of *all* revolutionaries, according to Arendt, *since* the French Revolution: although "drunk" on the "wine of freedom" in the "abstract," they clearly no longer believe that they themselves are "free agents."[620] Essential to any understanding of revolution in the modern age, explains Arendt, is the "idea of freedom" combined with the experience of an entirely "new beginning"—a total or complete break from the past.[621] Also essential, however, is the paradoxical "*notion of irresistibility, the fact that the revolving motion of the stars follows a preordained path and is removed from all influence of human power.*"[622] Prior to revolutions in the modern age, the notion of irresistibility referred to a "backward revolving movement"—a cyclical movement of the kind that Machiavelli describes when in Book 3 of the *Discourses* he writes of the need for "mixed bodies" such as "sects and republics" to periodically renew themselves.[623] As evidenced by the above passage, however, by the time of the French Revolution, the notion of irresistibility, like the concept of time more generally, had already undergone a fundamental transformation. No longer indicative of a backward revolving or cyclical movement, this notion was now indicative of the irresistibility of a Christian or "rectilinear" one—the irresistibility of a movement that, as we saw in Chapter 2, "the nineteenth century soon was to conceptualize into the idea of historical necessity…"[624] Consequently, characteristic of the psychology of modern revolutionaries is the contradictory belief that although fighting for freedom, they are themselves the

[620] Arendt, *On Revolution*, 49.
[621] Arendt, 29.
[622] Arendt, 47 (emphasis mine).
[623] Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, III.1.1.
[624] Arendt, *On Revolution*, 48.

determined agents—the dispensable means—of a historical process which is ultimately, beyond their control (ie. removed from all influence of human power). Indeed, the various "metaphors" they employ to justify their fanatical behavior—that history follows certain irresistible "streams and currents," that it follows certain "ineluctable laws," whether historical or natural—prove as much.

In *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt demonstrates how, by employing these metaphors, modern revolutionaries essentially render themselves, like God, infallible; for whereas on the one hand, such metaphors serve to implicitly justify doing anything and everything—whether it be manning guillotines, liquidating kulaks, or building gas chambers—that might be said to "speed up" what is already fated to happen; on the other hand, such metaphors serve to implicitly *absolve* anyone and everyone of any blame for simply taking it upon themselves to perform what Marx, as we have seen, calls "the task of their times." Arendt provides two examples to illustrate the point: Hitler's announcement to the German Reichstag in January, 1939, and Stalin's "great speech before the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1930. Whereas in the former, Hitler reveals his intention to "kill the Jews of Europe," in the latter, Stalin reveals his intention to liquidate what he calls "dying classes."[625] Yet as Arendt points out, insofar as in both instances otherwise entirely political intentions are presented as "prophecies"—as the "correct interpretation of the essentially reliable forces of history or nature"—in both instances "the same objective is accomplished: the liquidation is fitted into a *historical process* in which man only does or suffers what, according to immutable

[625] Arendt, 349.

laws, is bound to happen anyway. As soon as the execution of the victims has been carried out, the 'prophecy' becomes a retrospective alibi: *nothing happened but what had already been predicted*."[626]

In the *Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, Tocqueville is clearly trying to come to terms with how the "propaganda effect of infallibility," as Arendt calls it (or "vanguardism" as it also sometimes called), manifested itself in the behavior of the French revolutionaries.[627] Well before Arendt, Tocqueville had already recognized that there was something altogether novel about the French Revolution. Near the beginning of the *Ancien Regime*, he notes how despite being irreligious, it nevertheless proceeded in an unusually violent and, paradoxically, "religious" manner. As he writes:

> Since [the Revolution] appeared to aim at the regeneration of the human race even more than at the reform of France, it kindled a passion that *not even the most violent political revolutions* had ever aroused before. It inspired proselytism and propaganda and therefore came to resemble a religious revolution, which was what contemporaries found so frightening about it. Or, rather, it itself became a new kind of religion – an imperfect religion, to be sure, without God, cult, or afterlife – yet a religion that, like Islam, inundated the earth with its soldiers, apostles, and martyrs.[628]

At first, Tocqueville's comparison of the French Revolution to Islam and the French revolutionaries themselves to "martyrs" may seem odd. After all, unlike Islam the French Revolution was in no uncertain terms a *secular* undertaking; its "martyrs" were "godless." Upon reflection, however, this comparison makes much more sense than meets the eye. For like religious "martyrs," the French revolutionaries also behaved in such a way that, as we have seen, believers in the dogma of the necessity of human actions are liable to behave. No, they did not conceive of themselves as "blind

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[626] Arendt, *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*, 349.
[627] See, for instance, Roger Scruton, *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 719.
[628] Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, 142.

instruments in the hands of God" (to use Tocqueville's own formulation). Again, their "religion" was godless. But as Tocqueville proceeds to reveal, while they had no doubt turned their backs on the idea that providence was pulling the proverbial strings, they remained convinced that something else—some other "superior force"—was. As Tocqueville goes on to write:

> If the French who made the Revolution were more unbelieving than we are, they retained at least one admirable belief that we do not share: they believed in themselves. *They did not doubt the perfectibility or power of man*. They clamored eagerly for man's glory and had faith in his virtue. They bolstered their own strength with that proud confidence that often leads to error but without which a people is capable only of servitude. *They had no doubt that they had been summoned to transform society and regenerate the human race*.[629]

What is interesting about this passage is the paradox at the heart of it, which essentially parallels the paradox articulated by Arendt in *On Revolution*, above. Despite their apparent unbelief, the French who made the Revolution did not become paralyzed by doubt—and for good reason. As we saw in the previous chapter, while human beings can turn their backs on God, they cannot extirpate from their souls that which makes them human to begin with: their taste for the infinite and love of what is immortal. Insofar as this taste and love will forever remain in their souls, it is only a matter of time before their otherwise religious longings reassert themselves, whether it be in overtly religious or seemingly irreligious ways. Rather than become paralyzed by doubt, then, the French Revolutionaries simply substituted an overtly religious belief in the infinite and immortal nature of God with a seemingly secular, irreligious one in the perfectibility or power of man: in the indefinite and thus immortal nature of progress.[630] In effect, while the

[629] Tocqueville, 142 (emphasis mine).
[630] Tocqueville, 158. "In 1780," writes Tocqueville, "no one was still claiming that France was on the decline. Indeed, it seemed that no limits to its further progress remained. It was at that time that the theory of man's continual and unlimited perfectibility first appeared. Twenty years earlier, the future had inspired

behavior of those who made the Revolution might at first *appear* aristocratic, their behavior is much more democratic than meets the eye. For just as religious martyrs believe that they have been summoned by God to carry out his plan, so the French Revolutionaries believed that they had been summoned by progress "to transform society and regenerate the human race." They did not so much conceive of themselves as the unwitting agents of providence as they did the witting agents progress—believers in democratic history as opposed to revelation.

## THE PERSISTENT DANGER OF DEMOCRATIC HISTORY: ON THE PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES OF FRANCIS FUKUYAMA'S *THE END OF HISTORY AND THE LAST MAN*

In Part 2, Chapter 1 of the *Recollections*, Tocqueville observes that although he is now able to "sit back" and "contemplate the causes" that led to the Revolution of 1848, on the day that the Revolution broke out he had other things on his mind: "namely, the events themselves" and "what would follow."[631] According to Tocqueville, the "events themselves" were depressing. This was the "second revolution" that he had witnessed in seventeen years and while both distressed him, this one distressed him far more. As it transpired, he became increasingly convinced that after having spent "the best years" of his youth living in a "society that seemed to be recovering its prosperity and grandeur as it regained its liberty," its prosperity, grandeur and worst of all, its liberty, would soon be gone.[632] As for "what would follow" the Revolution, however, he simply could not say.

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no hope; now nothing was left to fear. *The imagination, preemptively laying claim to this unprecedented impending felicity, inured people to the goods they already possessed and hastened them in pursuit of new things*" (emphasis mine).

[631] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 47.

[632] Tocqueville, 47.

He knew that whatever was to come, it would not satisfy him. But what, exactly, it would be—what fate would be in store for his "nephews"—remained, at least in his view, a mystery; for as he goes on to write:

> I rehearsed in my mind the history of the past sixty years and smiled bitterly at the illusions we nursed at the end of each phase of our long revolution; at the theories that thrived on those illusions; at the learned daydreams of our historians; and at the many ingenious but erroneous systems with which we attempted to explain a present that we still perceived only dimly and to predict a future that we could not perceive at all.
>
> The constitutional monarchy succeeded the Ancien Regime. The Republic succeeded the monarchy. The Empire succeeded the Republic. The Restoration succeeded the Empire. Then came the July Monarchy. After each of these successive transformations people said that the French Revolution, having completed what they presumptuously called its work, was over. They said it and believed it. Alas! *I had myself hoped* it was true during the Restoration and again after the government of the Restoration fell. And now the French Revolution has begun anew, for it remains the same revolution as before. The farther we go, the more obscure its end becomes. Will we—as prophets as unreliable perhaps as their predecessors assure us we will—achieve a social transformation more complete and more profound than our forefathers foresaw and desired, or than we ourselves can yet conceive? Or must we end simply in intermittent anarchy, that chronic and incurable malady that old nations know so well? I cannot say and have no idea when this long journey will end. I am tired of mistaking deceptive mists for the shore and often wonder whether the terra firma for which we have been searching actually exists, or whether our destiny is not rather to ply the seas forever.[633]

Here, Tocqueville not only reveals just how chaotic history can be, but also (and for our purposes, more importantly) just how *anxious* about the future—just how desperate for solid ground—human beings can become as a result. As evidenced by the past 60 years, history has a way of making fools out of historians who, whether for genuinely philanthropic or self-aggrandizing reasons or both, take it upon themselves to design ingenious systems that attempt to predict the future and, in so doing, provide the very "terra firma" that human beings, when confronted by the chaos characteristic of history, find themselves looking for. History has a way, in other words, of exposing these historians for what they are: democratic poets constructing products of the imagination—

[633] Tocqueville, 47–48.

learned daydreams or "second realities" designed specifically to make sense of the chaos characteristic of history to which human beings are tragically subjected. No wonder Tocqueville refrains from trying to predict what will follow the Revolution of 1848. Given all of the historical events he has thus far witnessed, he simply cannot say where 'History,' so to speak, is going, let alone how or even if, it might end. This is something that only God could possibly know.

And yet, it is not that simple. For as Tocqueville also reveals, just as history has a way of making fools out of historians who, by designing "ingenious" historical systems effectively take it upon themselves to provide human beings with the solid ground they so desire, so these very historians have a way of *destroying* the very solid ground that their systems are otherwise designed to provide.

In Part 2, Chapter 2 of the *Recollections*, Tocqueville discusses "the socialist character" of the Revolution of 1848 and at first, tells us that it is not his intent to "discover" what gave it that character. "It has not been the intent of these *Recollections*," he writes, to discover what gave the February revolution its socialist character."[634] Nevertheless, as Tocqueville proceeds to explain, what gave it its socialist character is upon reflection obvious: the pervasive influence of what he calls the "monstrous and grotesque designs" of "innovators."

To what "designs" and to which "innovators" is Tocqueville referring? Unfortunately, he does not say—that is, at least not in the *Recollections*. Indeed, all he says in the *Recollections* is that although these designs "may be judged to be

[634] Tocqueville, 54.

ludicrous…nothing is worthier of the serious attention of philosophers and statesmen than the canvas on which they worked." This is a canvas comprised of the restlessness characteristic of democratic man, on the one hand, and the "inevitable agitation of desires and thoughts" that such restlessness breeds, on the other.[635] Luckily for us, however, in a letter to his friend M. de Corcelle, Tocqueville *does* happen to reveal which design gave the Revolution of 1848 its "socialist character." Writing in 1854 from Germany, Tocqueville tells de Corcelle that like France, Germany is "politically diseased"—and for essentially the same reason: it, too, has become taken by the monstrous and grotesque designs of innovators—and by the design of one innovator in particular. As Tocqueville writes:

> You are, of course, aware of the part played by philosophy during the last fifty years in Germany, and especially by the school of Hegel. He was protected, as, no doubt, you know, by the ruling powers, because his doctrines asserted that, in a political sense, all established facts ought to be submitted to as *legitimate*; and that the very circumstance of their existence was sufficient to make obedience to them a duty. This doctrine gave rise at length to the anti-Christian and anti-spiritual schools, which have been endeavoring to pervert Germany for the last twenty years, especially for the last ten; *and finally to the socialist philosophy, which had so great a share in producing the confusion of 1848*. Hegel exacted submission to the ancient established powers of his own time; which he held to be legitimate, not only from existence, but from their origin. His scholars wished to establish powers of another kind, which, as soon as they existed, became therefore, according to their views, equally legitimate and binding. This did not suit the official protectors of Hegel. Yet from this Pandora's box have escaped all sorts of moral diseases from which the people is still suffering.[636]

This letter is important for two reasons. First, it reveals the identity of one of the "monstrous and grotesque" designs to which Tocqueville anonymously refers in his *Recollections*: that of Gobineau's philosophical mentor, Hegel, whose theory of historical inevitability, as we have seen, also heavily influenced Marx. Indeed, if we recall, despite

[635] Tocqueville, 54 (emphasis mine).
[636] Alexis de Tocqueville, "Tocqueville to Corcelle, July 22, 1854," in *Memoir, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville*, *Vol. 2* (MacMillan and Co., 1861), 270-271.

being on the political Left, Marx no less than Gobineau inherited from Hegel the notion that one common phenomenon (in his case economic relations or class) "ties together the whole story of mankind, giving it a beginning, a middle, and presumably an end." This brings us to the second reason why this passage is important. In it, Tocqueville unwitting describes what Karl Löwith calls "the schism of the Hegelian school into right and left wings…," into "old" and "young" Hegelians, respectively—a schism that accounts not only for the behavior of the French Revolutionaries in 1848, but that also happens to account for the behavior of modern revolutionaries in general.[637]

As Löwith observes, this schism was "made possible by the basic ambiguity of Hegel's dialectical *Aufhebungen* ("suspensions"), which could be interpreted conservatively and revolutionarily with equal ease."[638] On the one hand, these suspensions could be interpreted conservatively because, insofar Hegel's theory of historical inevitability—like any theory of historical inevitability—conflates what "is" with what "ought" to be, it serves to preserve the status-quo: deny the "rationality or grounds of all political opposition."[639] On the other hand, however, these suspensions could be interpreted revolutionarily because, insofar as Hegel's theory of historical inevitability—again, like any theory historical inevitability—holds that the historical process consists in an irresistible movement, over time, towards a nebulous "end," it at the very same time serves to "perpetually negate" the very status-quo that it otherwise serves to preserve.[640] The end result is this: whereas the conservative interpretation of

[637] Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought* (Columbia University Press, 1991), 70.
[638] Löwith, 70.
[639] Zuckert, "Political Sociology Versus Speculative Philosophy," 123.
[640] Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 70.

these suspensions conflates virtue with obedience (irrational passivity), the revolutionary interpretation of these suspensions conflates virtue with terror (irrational fanatical activity). Put another way, whereas the conservative interpretation of these suspensions promotes the ascension of democratic despotism, the revolutionary interpretation of these suspensions promotes "permanent revolution." Either way, then, the preservation of liberty and human dignity becomes untenable. Equality in servitude or unending chaos come into view as the only viable alternatives.[641]

As much as reflecting on the history of the past 60 years made Tocqueville smile "bitterly" at the learned daydreams of historians, then, it was the learned daydreams of one democratic historian in particular that gave rise to the behavior of the revolutionaries in 1848—all of which brings us back to the main argument of this chapter: that by creating absolute historical systems which are "false beneath the air of their mathematical truth," democratic historians are not just being theoretically reckless. They are as a direct result being politically reckless, as well. As a recent example, one need only consider Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*.

As we saw at the end of the previous chapter, in *Liberal Democracy and Political Science* James Ceaser explains why until recently, democratic leaders have tended to eschew theories of historical inevitability. For the better part of the 20th century, these leaders were constantly reminded of the fact that theories of historical inevitability lay at

[641] Insofar as it is the goal of democratic despotism, according to Tocqueville, to make the "use of free will less useful and rarer every day," irrational passivity would serve only to facilitate its coming into being. Alternatively, inasmuch as the chief goal of permanent revolution, according to Marx, is to destroy "all more or less possessing classes" on a global scale, it essentially necessitates the perpetuation of irrational fanatical activity. Compare Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1251; with and Karl Marx, "Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 505.

the heart of both fascism and communism and thus at the heart of regimes that not only in theory opposed but also in practice actively sought to undermine liberal democracy. By virtue of what it meant to hold political office during these decades, this was a fact that democratic leaders simply could not ignore. Consequently, in defining themselves against either fascism or communism, democratic leaders essentially defined themselves against the idea of historical inevitability.[642] Granted, they too believed in progress. But their belief in progress remained tempered by a sober recognition of the limits of politics in a liberal as opposed to communist or fascist society. It remained tempered by what the preservation of human liberty and dignity requires: moderation.

Then came the sudden of collapse of communism—an event which, far from discrediting the idea of historical inevitability (as one might expect), actually had the unanticipated consequence of strengthening it. No, democratic leaders did not suddenly begin reading Marx. But what they did start to wonder is whether Fukuyama (an author with whom many of these leaders, whether on their own or through the intellectual ether of the time, became familiar) was onto something when he posited that liberal democracy itself was the final form human government; that the idea of historical inevitability should have been applied to liberal democracy, all along.

For his part, Francis Fukuyama would most likely disagree with how I, following Ceaser, have characterized his argument. In *America at the Crossroads*, he rebukes those who "misread" him as arguing for the inevitability of liberal democracy. As he explains:

> Many people interpret my book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) as arguing in favor of…a universal hunger for liberty in all people that will inevitably lead them to liberal democracy, and that we are living in the midst of an accelerating, transnational movement in favor of liberal democracy. This is a misreading of the argument…I never

[642] Ceaser, 174.

> posited a strong version of modernization theory, with rigid stages of development or economically determined outcomes. Contingency, leadership, and ideas always played a complicating role, which made major setbacks possible if not likely.[643]

Apparently aware of the fact that by advancing a "strong version of modernization theory" he would leave no room in history for accident and statesmanship (for a realm of human life that, as already articulated above, is not *totally determined* by a "superior force" or "general and eternal laws"), here Fukuyama assures us that, lest one conclude otherwise, he never has. On the contrary, all he has done is re-affirm the apparently benign idea that "Economic modernization, when successful, tends to drive demands for political participation by creating a middle class with property to protect, higher levels of education, and greater concern for their recognition as individuals…"

Nevertheless, the fact remains: whether he has been misread or not, Fukuyama can for obvious reasons be credibly accused of at least having *revived* (if not himself originally advanced) a theory of historical inevitability that, like Gobineau's on the political Right and like Marx's on the political Left, has had very real practical consequences as well. Indeed, in the very same book in which he rebukes those who "misread" his argument, he all but concedes just this.

Quoting Ken Jowitt, Fukuyama makes a point of distinguishing between his own "views" and those officials in the Bush administration who, prior to 9/11, read his argument correctly but who following 9/11, nevertheless changed their minds as to what kind of foreign policy agenda it apparently condoned. As Jowitt writes:

> Initially, if implicitly, the Bush administration subscribed to the 'end of history' thesis that the 'rest' of the world would more or less naturally become like the West in general and the United States in particular. September 11 changed that. In its aftermath, the Bush

[643] Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (Yale University Press, 2007), 55–56.

> administration has concluded that Fukuyama's historical timetable is too laissez-faire and not nearly attentive enough to the levers of historical change. History, the Bush administration has concluded, needs deliberate organization, leadership, and direction. In this irony of ironies, the Bush administration's identification of regime change as critical to its anti-terrorist policy and integral to its desire for a democratic capitalist world has led to an active 'Leninist' foreign policy in place of Fukuyama's passive 'Marxist' social teleology.[644]

Jowitt's characterization of the Bush administration's foreign policy as 'Leninist' may seem odd. Unlike George W. Bush, Lenin was in no uncertain terms a man of the political Left. Upon reflection, however, where these men stand on the political spectrum simply does not matter. What matters is that insofar as the former's administration was comprised of individuals who, rather like Lenin, also subscribed to a theory of historical inevitability (ie. had also become captivated by democratic history), it was an administration that prior to 9/11 had a an unusually passive—essentially *anti-Wilsonian*—foreign policy agenda but that following 9/11 had an unusually active, "Leninist" one.[645] It was an administration, in short, that went from following the quiet way of Nicias to the loud way of Alcibiades, overnight.[646]

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[644] Kenneth Jowitt, "Rage, Hubris, and Regime Change: The Urge to Speed History Along," *Policy Review*, Vol. 118 (2003): 33-42.

[645] For an overview of the relationship between Fukuyama's end of history thesis and the Bush administration's foreign policy agenda see, for instance, C. Hobson, "Beyond the End of History: The Need for a 'Radical Historicisation' of Democracy in International Relations," *Millennium — Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 3, (2009), 634–636; Charles R. Kesler, "Democracy and The Bush Doctrine," *The Right War: The Conservative Debate on Iraq*, ed. by G.Rosen, (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 228–299; and Michael Harland, "Democratic Vanguardism: Francis Fukuyama and the Bush Doctrine," *Arena Journal*, Vol. 39 No. 40 (2013), 51-67.

[646] For an analysis of the sharp contrast between the Bush administration's foreign policy agenda prior to 9/11 and following 9/11, see Benjamin Miller, "Explaining Changes in U.S. Grand Strategy: 9/11, the Rise of Offensive Liberalism, and the War in Iraq," *Security Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2010): 26-65; Tom Rockmore, *Before and After 9/11: A Philosophical Examination of Globalization, Terror, and History* (Continuum International Publishing, 2011); and Robert Kagan, "The September 12 Paradigm: America, The World, and George W. Bush," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 5 (2008): 25-39.

According to Fukuyama, Jowitt's differentiation between his own "passive 'Marxist' social teleology," on the one hand, and the Bush administration's "Leninist" foreign policy, on the other, could not be more apt. As Fukuyama goes on to write:

> I did not like the original version of Leninism and was skeptical when the Bush administration turned Leninist. Democracy in my view is likely to expand universally in the long run. But whether the rapid and relatively peaceful transition to democracy and free markets…can be quickly replicated in other parts of the world, or promoted through the application of power by outsiders at any given point in history, is open to doubt.[647]

Still, merely by calling attention to the difference between his own "passive 'Marxist' social teleology," on the one hand, and the Bush administration's "Leninist" foreign policy, on the other, Fukuyama implicitly concedes that *The End of History and the Last Man*, no less than Hegel's "monstrous design," also apparently encouraged otherwise free, morally responsible human beings to view themselves not self-legislating ends in themselves, but rather, as either the *decelerants* or *accelerants* of a historical process, beyond their control. From Hegel's "Pandora's box have escaped all sorts of moral diseases from which the people is still suffering," indeed.

As we saw at very beginning of this chapter, in his letter to Borgius, Engels makes an argument initially advanced by Kant in his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*: that although "Individual men and even entire nations…are pursuing their own ends, each in his own way and often in opposition to others, they are unwittingly guided in their advance along a course intended by nature." As Kant presents it, this is something that men "little imagine" and that, even if they were aware of it, "would scarcely arouse their interest." [648] But as we have seen, even if Kant is right about

[647] Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads*, 54–55.
[648] Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," *Kant: Political Writings*, 41.

individuals and nations being "unwittingly guided," he is obviously wrong about their "little imagining" that this is the case. Despite what Kant suggests, theories of historical inevitability like those of Hegel, Marx, Gobineau, and Fukuyama, are *not simply* the equivalent of long-term weather forecasts.[649] They are not simply passive predictions about the future that, in time, will either prove true or false. Rather, they are in themselves political actions because inasmuch as they are concerned with predicting the future of *human things*, they influence not only how human beings perceive themselves as actors in the world, but as a direct result, perceive and act towards one another, as well. This especially true in a democratic age where, given his psychological makeup, democratic man is already naturally inclined to embrace absolute systems. The question that remains that we shall return to, then, is whether Tocqueville—himself a historian who at one point refers to human beings as "blind instruments in the hands of God"—is also guilty of creating a Pandora's Box. Indeed, to return to the question animating this study: does Tocqueville differ from the very democratic historians he criticizes? If so, how?

[649] Kant, 41. As Kant argues, while "marriages, births, and deaths do not seem to be subject to any rule by which their numbers could be calculated in advance…the annual statistics for them in large countries prove that they are just as subject to constant natural laws as are the changes in the weather."

# Chapter 5: Making History Safe for Democracy: Tocqueville's "Profoundly Ambiguous" Theory of History, Reconsidered

*Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as 'History,' harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic.*[650]

-Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*

*...I believe that many important historical facts can be explained only by accidental circumstances, while many others remain inexplicable, and finally, that chance—or, rather, that skein of secondary causes that we call chance because we cannot untangle them—plays a major part in everything that takes places on the world stage. But I also firmly believe that chance accomplishes nothing for which the groundwork has not been laid in advance. Prior facts, the nature of institutions, the cast of people's minds, and the state of mores are the materials out of which chance improvises the effects we find so surprising and terrible to behold.*[651]

- Tocqueville, *Recollections*

As evidenced by their correspondence, despite their friendship Tocqueville had little respect for Gobineau's opus magnum and for two, inextricably connected reasons. First, whereas Gobineau was "mathematically certain" about the "correctitude" of his historical system, Tocqueville recognized that because human beings are not God—that because they cannot know "the whole"—Gobineau's system was in fact "probably quite false" or, as he refers to such systems in his *Recollections,* "false beneath the air of its mathematical truth." To be sure, Tocqueville admits that just as Gobineau cannot definitely prove that his system is true, Tocqueville cannot definitely prove that it is false. But again, for Tocqueville this does not really matter. What matters is that insofar as

[650] Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004), 113–14.
[651] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 45.

Gobineau, in a way like "the materialists," *claims* to have discovered the "master-key" to understanding social and political reality as a whole, the burden of proof is on him.

Second, whereas Gobineau remained convinced that because his method was "purely scientific," his *Essai* was inconsequential, Tocqueville recognized that insofar as the *Essai* dealt with human things it was not only consequential, but also dangerously so. For unlike Gobineau, he understood that by claiming to have uncovered the master-key to understanding social and political reality as a whole, Gobineau was not just propagating "certain untruth" at the expense of pursuing "uncertain truth," but in so doing, propagating a totalitarian or theoretically infallible doctrine that, whether he intended it to or not, would serve only to undermine the preservation of liberty and human dignity in a democratic age. In sum, whereas Gobineau thought of his *Essai* as the historical equivalent of "geology, medicine, [and] archeology," Tocqueville recognized that insofar as human beings are more than mere matter—that is, not simply the blood in their veins—the *Essai* was the intellectual equivalent of poison.

And yet, what is interesting about Tocqueville's correspondence with Gobineau is not only what it reveals about the danger of Gobineau's *Essai* and therewith it, democratic history in general, but also what it *does not* reveal about Gobineau's apparently low regard for Tocqueville as an intellectual. As the first few letters of their correspondence indicate, initially Tocqueville had wanted to collaborate with Gobineau on a book project, the purpose of which would be to analyze the "new moral concepts and social habits developing in Europe during the dissolution of the old aristocratic order

and with the new growth of democracy."[652] But for some reason, this book was never written. According to Michael Biddiss, "it has been suggested by some that the project failed because Gobineau did not succeed in procuring enough usable material," but it is difficult to know whether this was in fact the case.[653] What we do know is that regardless of whether he was able to procure enough usable material, over the years Gobineau seems to have lost interest in the project and not only because he lost interest in the topic. In a letter written to Comte de Circourt in 1868 (nearly a decade after Tocqueville's death), Gobineau tells de Circourt that he, too, is "very struck" by the distorting effect that August Comte's "detestable and absurd philosophical theory" has had on the thinking of so many of his contemporaries.[654] Such a theory, he observes, is hardly the product of a "serious and informed mind," and yet it influences how "men of affairs" think, without their even realizing it. As an example, one need only consider Tocqueville: "I will tell you," writes Gobineau, "but between us, of course, that I consider one of [Comte's] involuntary but powerful apostles, M de Tocqueville. He was not a philosopher from any point of view…Of natural and immutable predispositions, he wanted to know nothing, and Beaumont was the same."[655]

To be sure, coming from a man who himself was not a philosopher—nay, who embraced gnosis over philosophy—this is hardly a slight. Gobineau may well have thought that from no point of view was Tocqueville a philosopher, but neither was

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[652] John Lukacs, "Introduction," in *Tocqueville and the European Revolution: Correspondence with Gobineau Introduction*, edited and translated by John Lukacs (Double Day and Anchor Books, 1959), 15.
[653] Michael D. Biddiss, *Father of Racist Ideology: The Social and Political Thought of Count Gobineau*. (Weybright and Talley, 1970), 57.
[654] Arthur de Gobineau, "Gobineau to Comte de Circourt, April 29, 1868," in *Études Gobiennes* (Éditions Klinksieck, 1967), 95 (Translation is my own).
[655] Gobineau, 95.

Gobineau and Tocqueville recognized as much. In a letter written to the very Beaumont mentioned by Gobineau above, Tocqueville goes so far as to call Gobineau's philosophy of history a "theory more appropriate for a horse dealer than a statesman," and says that he "does not believe any of it."[656] Furthermore, the notion that Tocqueville was somehow an "involuntary" apostle of Comte is confusing, to say the least. If anything, Gobineau was the unwitting follower of Comte—a democratic historian who well before Gobineau, advanced a uni-causal, all encompassing, theory of history of his own.[657] Nevertheless, what is important about Gobineau's criticism of Tocqueville is not so much what it reveals about why their book project failed but what it implies about a certain view of science that democratic historians like Gobineau subscribe to and that, as we shall see, Tocqueville deliberately rejects.

The view of science to which I am referring is a view that Jon Elster, in the Introduction to *Alexis de Tocqueville: The First Social Scientist*, describes when he writes the following:

> Most social scientists, if they have read Tocqueville, probably do not think he is up to their standards. They may applaud his ambition, but deny that it was matched by any actual achievements. I do not have any hard evidence to prove this statement, but a long acquaintance with the social sciences tells me that he is much less of a household name than Marx, Durkheim, or Weber…The reason, I suspect, is that for contemporary social science what counts as 'an achievement' is determined by a certain view of science as resting on lawlike theories and aiming at sharp predictions.[658]

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[656] Alexis de Tocqueville, "Tocqueville to Beaumont, November 3, 1853," in *Tocqueville on America After 1840: Letters and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. by Aurelian Crăiuțu and Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 328.
[657] Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 69. As Löwith observes, "From the study of the general development, Comte deduces 'the great fundamental law' (anticipated by Saint-Simon and Turgot) that each branch of civilization and of our knowledge passes successively through three different stages: the theological or fictitious (childhood), the metaphysical or abstract (youth), and the scientific or positive (manhood)."
[658] Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville: The First Social Scientist*, 2.

As we have seen, this view of science as resting on lawlike theories and aiming at sharp predictions is a view that not only "most social scientists," as Elster here suggests, subscribe to, but also, that democratic historians like Gobineau and Marx as self-proclaimed scientific historians essentially take for granted. It is a view of science that when applied to human behavior converts the contingent into the necessary—that is, eliminates the phenomenon of accident from human affairs altogether—and thus results in the historical equivalent of materialism: what Karl Popper calls historicism or what I, in the previous chapter, refer to as historical determinism.[659] It is a view of science that, when applied to social and political reality, holds out the promise of being able to prophesize or predict the future—a promise that, as we have seen, given not only the expectations of their democratic readers, but also, their gnostic desire to systematize history, democratic historians are, in particular, wont to keep.

Accordingly, it is a view of science that Tocqueville never or, at the very least, *never fully* appears to embrace, thereby placing him in tension with how most social scientists, in keeping with Gobineau, understand what "counts" as an intellectual achievement. As James Ceaser observes, "Although Gobineau rarely cites Tocqueville in his published work, he clearly intended the *Essai* as a response to *Democracy in America*, which he considered an unphilosophical and unsystematic work."[660] Something similar, however, might be said of the social scientists to whom Elster is referring above. According to Elster, they too rarely reference Tocqueville and for a similar reason: just as

[659] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 8. As Popper defines it, historicism consists in the belief that "history is controlled by specific historical or evolutionary laws whose discovery would enable us to prophesy the destiny of man."
[660] Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, 148.

Gobineau clearly intended the *Essai* as a response to the "unsystematic" and "unphilosophical" *Democracy in America*, so social scientists clearly intend their enterprise as a response to what Hobbes initially claimed was "rather a dream than a science" anyways.[661] For them as for Gobineau, the unsystematic must of necessity be unscientific and vice versa.

So it follows that when it comes to making sense of Tocqueville's own, "profoundly ambiguous" theory of history—his own conception of the 'historical process'—scholars have for the most part tended to do one of two things: either interpret it as being wholly consistent with a view of science that, like Gobineau's, rests on lawlike theories and aims at sharp predictions; or alternatively, interpret it as a clever use of rhetoric, on Tocqueville's part, "to resolve the main political conflict of his own time…the conflict that arises from the question of whether society may be most justly ruled by the few or the many."[662]

To briefly return to the Introduction: insofar as scholarly interpretations of Tocqueville's theory of history have, for the most part, focused on locating "something equivalent to a philosophy of history" in his thought, they have for the most part failed to adequately take into account Tocqueville's concern for "practice." Lest one forget, "Tocqueville writes with full consciousness of the requirements of political practice; his first consideration is always the effect his thought will have on society."[663] As he makes explicit in both *Democracy in America* and *The Ancien Regime*, he is writing not just for

[661] Hobbes, Leviathan, XLVI.11.
[662] Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy,* 20.
[663] Zetterbaum, 21.

philosophers, but also, for statesmen.[664] Accordingly, scholars who assume that Tocqueville's theory of history, despite being "profoundly ambiguous," is nevertheless *wholly consistent with* a view of science that rests on lawlike theories and aiming at sharp predictions, unwittingly turn him into a democratic historian of the very kind he criticizes. For them, Tocqueville is much closer to Marx than he is, for instance, to Aristotle, because for Tocqueville as for Marx, history, like nature, is rational.

At the same time, however, Zetterbaum arguably reflects the mirror opposite of these scholars. According to him, Tocqueville's chapter on the "distinguishing features" or methodological tendencies of historians in democratic centuries offers "the closest approximation to a satisfactory explanation" for how, in accordance with Tocqueville's profoundly ambiguous theory of history, men are at once "free and not free."[665] Even so, however, Zetterbaum discusses these "distinguishing features" only insofar as they relate to the main argument of his book: that Tocqueville, far from actually exhibiting these distinguishing features himself, only *appears* to exhibit them—that is, exhibits them for rhetorical purposes only. Yes, Zetterbaum readily acknowledges the contradiction between what Tocqueville accuses other democratic historians of doing, on the one hand, and what Tocqueville himself appears to do, on the other. But because Tocqueville, in Zetterbaum's view, is merely *pretending* to be a democratic historian, not only is there no contradiction between what Tocqueville himself does and what he accuses others of doing, but also there is no reason to discuss why Tocqueville exhibits these same "distinguishing features," any further. For Zetterbaum, Tocqueville is much closer to

[664] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 16; Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, 11.
[665] Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy*, 12.

Aristotle than he is to Marx, because for Zetterbaum, Tocqueville's apparent historicism is as much a "salutary myth" for stubborn French aristocrats as Aristotle's theory of moral virtue, it might be argued, is a salutary teaching for less than philosophic gentlemen.

In what follows, therefore, my aim is to demonstrate that contrary to how scholars have typically interpreted Tocqueville's theory of history, because Tocqueville is neither a social scientist who subscribes to a "view of science as resting on lawlike theories aiming at sharp predictions" *nor simply* a "statesman writing for statesmen," his theory of history is neither a "philosophy of history" properly so-called nor simply rhetorical. To begin, I discuss Tocqueville's claim (which he makes most forcefully in *Democracy in America*) that the "democratic revolution taking place among us" is "irresistible" or "inevitable." More specifically, I try to situate that claim within the context of when he was writing in order to show how, like the Restoration liberals before him, he too turned to writing *Democracy in America* and later, *The Ancien Regime*, for more than just political reasons. Next, I discuss why despite agreeing with the Restoration liberals that it was indeed imperative to take up the intellectual enterprise of trying to provide society, in the wake of having suffered a spiritual crisis, with a new "ideological synthesis," Tocqueville avoids falling into what he calls the "mania of the century" while doing so. As we saw in Chapter 1, at the very end of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville raises the question of whether he himself might be guilty of advancing a philosophy of history that, whether intentionally or not, vastly limits if not destroys human freedom by way of making entire peoples obedient to some "insurmountable and unintelligent force," of making them obedient to what he elsewhere calls "general and eternal laws." But as I

argue in this chapter, given Tocqueville's understanding of the relationship between what he calls the "cultivation of theory," on the one hand, and the "cultivation of practice," on the other, his theory of history remains much less systematic, much more political, and thus much more hospitable to—if not perfectly compatible with—the idea of human freedom than those of his contemporaries. As I ultimately argue, therefore, because Tocqueville is a historian for whom history is neither a "tale told by an idiot" (the function entirely of chance) *nor* a tale told by a prophet (the function entirely of necessity), his theory of history remains, like Montesquieu's before him, a profoundly ambiguous one that is much safer for democracy than those of the democratic historians he criticizes. These other theories of history, Tocqueville tells us, are both "false and cowardly." Insofar as his own theory remains profoundly ambiguous, however, it remains once truer and more ennobling.

## TOCQUEVILLE, THE RESTORATION LIBERALS, AND SPIRITUAL CRISIS

As we saw in Chapter 2, although many French liberals turned to writing history during the Bourbon restoration, they did so *not just* for political reasons. To be sure, they had a political purpose. The genre of history, they realized, could be used as a vehicle not only for defending, but also for selling the Revolution. But however partisan these historians no doubt were, as intellectuals politics was not their sole concern—and neither was it Tocqueville's.

Like the Restoration liberals, Tocqueville also argued for the inevitability or "necessity" of the Revolution because, like them, he too found it politically expedient. Just after publishing Volume 1 of *Democracy in America*, he penned a letter to Eugène

Stoffels in which he discusses the "political goal of the work" and, in so doing, reveals just this. As he writes:

> Here is the *political goal* of the work:
> I wanted to show what a democratic people was in our day, and through this rigorously exact picture, I intended to produce a double effect on the minds of the men of my time.
> To those who have worked out an ideal democracy, a glowing dream, that they believe can easily be realized, I undertook to show that they had covered the picture with false colors; that the democratic government they advocate, if it furnishes real benefits to the men who sustain it, does not have the elevated characteristics that their imagination gives it; that this government, moreover, can be maintained only by means of certain conditions of enlightenment, of private morality, of beliefs that we do not have, and which it is necessary to work to obtain before drawing from them the political consequences.
> To men for whom the word democracy is synonymous with upheaval, anarchy, spoliation, murders, I tried to show that democracy could manage to govern society while respecting fortunes, recognizing rights, securing liberty, honoring beliefs; that if democratic government developed less than some other governments certain beautiful faculties of the human soul, it had beautiful and grand sides; and that perhaps, after all, the will of God was to diffuse a mediocre happiness on the totality of men and not to concentrate a large amount of felicity on some and allow only a small number to approach perfection. I intended to demonstrate to them that, whatever their opinion might be in this regard, there was no longer time to deliberate; that society was every day proceeding and dragging them along with it toward equality of conditions; that it only remained to choose between evils henceforth inevitable; that the question was not knowing if one could obtain aristocracy or democracy, but if one would have a democratic society proceeding without poetry and without grandeur, but with order and morality, or a democratic society disordered and depraved delivered over to frenzied furors, or bent under a yoke heavier than all those that have weighed on men since the fall of the Roman Empire
> I wanted to diminish the ardor of the former, and, without discouraging them, show them the only road to take.
> I sought to diminish the terrors of the latter and to bend their will to the idea of an inevitable future, so that, the ones having less ardor and the others offering less resistance, society could advance more peacefully toward the necessary fulfillment of its destiny. There is the mother-idea of the work, the idea which links all the others in a single web…[666]

In this letter, Tocqueville reveals that the "political goal" of *Democracy in America* was to produce a "double effect on the minds of the men" his time. On the one hand, he wanted to convince partisans of democracy that the victory of democracy over aristocracy was much more problematic than they realized; that the arrival of democracy did not

[666] "Tocqueville to Eugène Stoffels, February 21, 1835," in *Alexis de Tocqueville: Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. and trans. by Roger Boesche and James Toupin (University of California Press, 1985), 98-99 (emphasis Tocqueville's).

amount to the realization of an ideal or a "glowing dream" as they assumed, but rather, to the arrival of something much less "elevated" and that, as a result, would prove itself much more difficult to maintain than they originally thought. On the other hand, however, Tocqueville wanted to convince partisans of the ancien regime that while democracy may lack the "elevated characteristics" of aristocracy, what it lacked in terms of elevated characteristics it made up for in terms of what it furnished, not just for a few but for the totality of men: happiness. As he goes on to reveal, however, key to producing this double effect on the minds of the men of his time was arguing, like the Restoration liberals before him, that the Revolution was inevitable; that the ancien regime had been destroyed and was never coming back; that democracy was the only way forward; that if the partisans of the old order could not bring themselves to accept what had happened (and was happening), God would do it for them.

According to Zetterbaum, therefore, what Tocqueville writes in this letter definitively proves that his inevitability thesis—his assertion in both *Democracy in America* and the *Ancien Regime* that democracy is "beyond the reach of man's powers"—is a rhetorical smoke screen, a "salutary myth" designed, again, "to resolve the main political conflict of his own time…"[667] If we recall, at the beginning *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville turns his attention to this conflict directly when he writes that, although everyone acknowledges that a "democratic revolution is taking place," not everyone "judges" it in the same way. "Some consider it as something new and, taking it for an accident, they hope still to be able to stop it; while others judge it irresistible,

[667] Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy*, 20.

because it seems to them the most continuous, oldest and most permanent fact known in history."[668] Put simply, while some people view this revolution as contingent or a product of chance, others view it as determined or a function of necessity. But according to Tocqueville, while not everyone judges this revolution in the same way, everyone should. The tendency of events clearly demonstrates that, contrary to those who consider it new and an accident, those who consider it is the most continuous, oldest and most permanent fact known in history are correct. As he explains:

> It isn't necessary for God himself to speak in order for us to discover sure signs of his will; it is enough to examine the regular march of nature and the continuous tendency of events; I know, without the Creator raising his voice, that the stars in space follow the curves traced by his fingers.
>
> If long observations and sincere meditations led men of today to recognize that the gradual and progressive development of equality is at once the past and the future of their history, this discovery alone would give this development the sacred character of the will of God. To want to stop democracy would then seem to be struggling against God himself, and it would only remain for nations to accommodate themselves to the social state that Providence imposes on them.[669]

What is noteworthy about this passage is the extent to which it suggests that Tocqueville is—like the Restoration liberals before him—also playing a political game. As we saw in Chapter 2, whereas Thierry argued that "the continued elevation of the Third Estate" is "the predominant fact" and "law" of French history, and that "this law of Providence has been accomplished more than once without the knowledge of those who were the agents of it," Guizot argued that "European civilization has entered, if we may so speak, into the eternal truth, into the plan of Providence; it progresses according to the intentions of God." Here, Tocqueville takes a page directly out of their playbook, with which was well

[668] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 6.
[669] Tocqueville, 14.

acquainted.[670] Like them, he appeals to the religious sentiments of his more conservative, de Maistrian readers, but without *actually* affirming the doctrine of Providence. Rather, he subverts that doctrine by subordinating the will of God to an empirical test, the seemingly indisputable results of which confirm that democracy, whether one likes it or not, is here to stay. Resisting democracy, he can therefore argue, would "*seem* to be struggling against God himself," even if it is not. Resisting democracy, he can imply, would *seem* to be impious.[671]

Still, while Zetterbaum is right to observe that by subordinating the will of God to an empirical test, Tocqueville is using the inevitability of democracy to advance a political goal—to resolve the main political conflict of his time—he is nonetheless wrong to therefore conclude that for Tocqueville, the inevitability of democracy is *simply* a "salutary myth." On the contrary—and, again, in keeping with the Restoration liberals—Tocqueville's invocation of historical necessity is actually sincere, even if his cloaking it in the doctrine of Providence is not.[672] For as he reveals in a letter to Louis de Kergorlay written one month before his letter to Stoffels, when it comes to the transition from

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[670] Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, trans. Beth G. Raps (University of Virginia Press, 1998), 8. According to Mélonio, "A very young man, [Tocqueville] read Augustin Thierry and kept several of his works in his library. He also perused Thiers, whose servile fatalism he detested, and went to hear Guizot's lectures on French history in 1829 and 1830." As we shall see bellow, however, given what he writes in a letter to Beaumont on October 5, 1828, he actually began attending Guizot's lectures a year earlier.

[671] Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy*, 8.

[672] I therefore in-part agree and in-part disagree with Roger Boesche who, in his Introduction to *Alexis de Tocqueville: Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, writes the following: "Every reader of Democracy in America knows that Tocqueville suggested that 'Providence' was pushing Europe irresistibly toward equality. He may have phrased his argument in this way because it was an easier and more palatable argument to make to his audience, far easier than Guizot's class analysis, but I think he also did it from conviction, as if he had never emerged from under the sway of Bossuet's arguments about God guiding history" (19). While Boesche is correct to note that Tocqueville sincerely believe that equality or democracy was "irresistible," he is wrong, in my view, to attribute that conviction to "Bossuet's arguments about God guiding history." Like Guizot, Tocqueville subordinates the doctrine of Providence to an empirical test, thereby stripping of its sacred content.

aristocracy to democracy, the French—along with millions of other men and women who have been pushed by God for centuries—*really do* have no choice. As he writes:

> *I am as deeply convinced as one can be of anything in this world* that we are being carried away irresistibly by our laws and our mores toward an almost complete equality of conditions. Once conditions are equal, I confess that I no longer see any intermediaries between a democratic government (and by this word I do not mean a republic, but a state of society in which everyone more or less would take part in public affairs) and the government of one person ruling without any control. *I do not for an instant doubt* that with time we will arrive at either one or the other.
> Now, I do not want the latter; if an absolute government were ever to establish itself in a country that is democratic in its social state and demoralized as France is, one cannot conceive what the limits of the tyranny would be; we have already seen fine specimens of this regime under
> Bonaparte and if Louis Philippe were free, he would enable us to see much more perfect ones still. Therefore only the first choice remains. I hardly like it any better than the latter, but nevertheless I do prefer it to the latter, and besides, if I fail in attaining the former, I am certain that the other will always be there. Thus, of two evils I choose the lesser.
> But isn't it very difficult to establish a democratic government among us? Of course. *So, if I had the choice*, *I would not attempt it*. Is it impossible to succeed? I doubt this greatly because independent of the political reasons I do not have time to elaborate, I cannot believe that God has been pushing two or three million men for several centuries toward equality of conditions in order to have them end in the despotism of Tiberius and Claudius. This would not truly be the problem.
> Why [God] is carrying us along this way toward democrac*y, I do not know; but embarked on a vessel I did not construct, I look for the means to reach the nearest port*. Is it perilous to attempt such an enterprise? Show me something that would be more perilous than staying still and a route that would be less dangerous to follow, and I will confess that I am wrong. In our day, society seems to me in the same situation as a man who is wounded in the arm; gangrene has set in and it is spreading. He is doubtless very upset about amputating the arm, and the operation may be fatal, but is it not better to live one-armed than to die with two?[673]

Zetterbaum never discusses this letter and perhaps for good reason: insofar as it reveals that democracy, according to Tocqueville, *really is* beyond the reach of man's powers—that democracy has in fact been foisted upon humanity (if not by "God" then by their own "laws and mores"), it casts doubt on the argument that his inevitability thesis is simply a "salutary myth," as Zetterbaum maintains. Nay, it refutes that argument because it reveals that just as the Restoration liberals, despite having a partisan agenda, also sincerely

[673] Alexis de Tocqueville, "Tocqueville to de Kergorlay, January, 1835," in *Alexis de Tocqueville: Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 94 (emphasis mine).

believed that the Revolution was more than just an "accident" (ie. that it was "irresistible" or "necessary"), so too did Tocqueville.[674] Furthermore, in this letter Tocqueville reveals that despite what Zetterbaum argues, he is actually much less convinced of the relative "justice" of democracy than he elsewhere lets on—whether it be in his letter to Stoffels above *or* in *Democracy in America* itself. In his letter to Stoffels, Tocqueville alludes to what at the very end of *Democracy in America* he makes much more explicit: that "It is natural to believe that what most satisfies the sight of [God] and preserver of men, is not the singular prosperity of a few, but the greatest well-being of all;" that "Equality is perhaps less elevated; but it is more just, and its justice makes its grandeur and its beauty."[675] In his letter to de Kergorlay, however, democracy's justice, its grandeur and its beauty, is nowhere to be found. To be sure, he freely admits that on the one hand he "cannot believe that God has been pushing two or three million men for several centuries toward equality of conditions in order to have them end in the despotism of Tiberius and Claudius." But as he also tells de Kergorlay, he does not actually know why this is happening. As far as he can tell democracy is to society what "gangrene" is to a "wounded man:" something that has set in, is irreversible, and that demands medical attention before it is too late. Where, one might ask, is the justice in that?

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[674] See also "Tocqueville to de Kergorlay, June, 1835," in Alexis de Tocqueville: Selected Letters on Politics and Society, In this letter, Tocqueville writes the following: "We ourselves are moving, my dear friend, toward a democracy without limits. I am not saying that this is a good thing; what I see in this country convinces me, on the contrary, that France will come to terms with it badly; but we are being pushed toward it by an irresistible force. *All the efforts that will be made to stop this movement will only provide pauses, since there is no human force that can change the law concerning estates and with this law our families will disappear*, estates will pass into other hands, riches will tend more and more to be equalized, the higher class dissolving itself into the middle and the middle becoming immense and imposing its equality on all" (emphasis mine).

[675] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1282.

Herein lies not only the reason why Tocqueville considers democracy to be such a "problem," as Zetterbaum refers to it, but also, why upon seeing it come into being, it produced a "religious terror" in his soul. In the first chapter of *The Ancien Regime*, Tocqueville observes that "in any number of writers" during the period of the Revolution—whether it be de Maistre who regarded the Revolution a divine punishment or Guizot who argued that it was God's beneficent plan to remake the world—"we find something of the religious terror that Salvianus experienced at the sight of the barbarians."[676] As evidenced by the Introduction to *Democracy in America*, however, the terror that afflicted de Maistre and the Restoration liberals afflicted Tocqueville, just as much. "The entire book that you are about to read," he writes, "has been written under the impression of a sort of religious terror produced in the soul of the author by the sight of this irresistible revolution that has marched for so many centuries over all obstacles, and that we still see today advancing amid the ruins that it has made."[677] Of course, unlike the Restoration liberals, Tocqueville never interprets this "irresistible revolution" as evidence of the fact that history is progressive; as we shall see below, when it comes to the idea of progress, he and the Restoration liberals part ways. For now, however, it is important simply to recognize that insofar as he, too, sincerely believed that democracy was inevitable, he too found himself consumed by the sort of religious terror that spiritual crises, as we saw in Chapter 2, are wont to produce in the souls of those who experience them.

[676] Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, 13.
[677] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 14.

Accordingly, just as de Maistre and the Restoration liberals were, in addition to using history for partisan purposes, also motivated by a more profound, all too human desire to find meaning in what had happened—to know the significance of the Revolution and what it meant not only for France, but for the whole of Europe and even mankind moving forward—so too was Tocqueville. He "accepted 1789 as a definitive point of rupture within French history. By the same token he accepted, along with his liberal or Doctrinaire predecessors, the sense that he too belonged to an obscure transitional generation." Consequently, he also adopted their "objectives."[678] He understood that because the Revolution had destroyed everything in its path, it was the responsibility of men like him to rebuild: to adopt the intellectual enterprise of providing society with a new "ideological synthesis."[679] Again, "The hope of 1789 was followed by division, civil war, the Terror, the despotism of Napoleon and finally defeat at Waterloo. The old centers of spiritual, political and moral authority were destroyed but no stable new order emerged."[680] Although born in 1805, Tocqueville was not immune from suffering both the political and psychological effects of any of this. The past was too recent; the future still too unpredictable. He makes this clear when, in the Introduction to *Democracy in America*, he writes that he can "find nothing that deserves to excite more distress and more pity than what is happening before our eyes; it seems that today we have broken the natural bond that unites opinions to tastes and actions to beliefs…"[681] In addition using the inevitability thesis to "resolve the main political conflict of his time,"

[678] Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 8.
[679] Charlton, *Secular Religions in France, 1815-1870,* 2.
[680] Crossley, F*rench Historians and Romanticism*, 2–3.
[681] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 24.

therefore, he also turned to writing *Democracy in America* and later, *The Ancien Regime*, in order to make sense of these events and help construct this much needed "new order."

And yet, while Tocqueville thought it was imperative that he, too, take up this intellectual enterprise, he did not, like so many of his contemporaries, succumb to what he calls the "mania of the century" while doing so. As we saw in Chapter 1, in editorial note at the very end of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville expresses his fear that he too might be guilty of having fallen into this mania—that is, of having advanced a philosophy of history that destroys human freedom by making entire peoples obedient to what he calls "general and eternal laws." However, as we shall see below, given his understanding of the relationship between theory and practice and, in particular, the limits that the latter necessarily imposes on the cultivating the former, his theory of history remains much less systematic, much more ambiguous, and thus much more hospitable to—if not perfectly compatible with—human freedom as a result.

## HISTORY UNDERSTOOD AS A "MORAL SCIENCE:" TOCQUEVILLE AND GOBINEAU ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

At one point in their correspondence, Gobineau informs Tocqueville that he has "with great interest" been keeping tabs on the impact of his book in a number of countries, including both Germany and America. Whereas in a letter dated March 20, 1856, he writes that people in Germany are "very interested" in the *Essai*, in a letter dated May 1, 1856, he reports that people in America are "taking it really seriously."[682] As it

[682] "Gobineau to Tocqueville, March 20, 1856" and "Tocqueville to Gobineau, May 1, 1856," *Correspondence*, 285; 288.

turns out, however, those who are "very interested" in the *Essai* are interested for an altogether different reason than those who are "taking it really seriously." In Germany, he tells Tocqueville, people are interested in the *Essai* because of their love for theory. Insofar as it is a country where the people "are more concerned with intrinsic truths" than with effects, it is a country where a book like the *Essai* is bound to be read and discussed because what it purports to reveal about the nature of social and political reality, and thus regardless of whether its practical consequences are pernicious.[683] Much like the French, the Germans are a people who subordinate practice to theory. Alternatively, in America people are taking the *Essai* seriously because of their love, paradoxically, for practice. Insofar as America is a country where people are more concerned with effects than with intrinsic truths, it is a country where a book like the *Essai* is bound to be read and discussed *precisely because* of its practical consequences, and thus regardless of whether what it purports to reveal about the nature of social and political reality is actually true. And as Gobineau himself confirms, unlike the Germans, the American read it for precisely this reason: "That very practical nation," he tells Tocqueville, "succeeded in fashioning from a purely scientific theory a political weapon which the contending parties now hurl at one another."[684] The *Essai*'s American translator, he observes, appears to have translated only that part of the *Essai* which establishes the "superiority of the American Anglo-Saxons…"[685] Unlike the Germans, the Americans subordinate theory to practice.

[683] "Gobineau to Tocqueville, March 20, 1856," *Correspondence,* 285.
[684] "Gobineau to Tocqueville, March 20, 1856," *Correspondence*, 286.
[685] Gobineau, 286.

For his part, Gobineau could not care less that his *Essai* is being used as a political weapon. This does not "disturb" him because, as far as he is concerned, this is simply the cost of doing business: of choosing methods that are "exclusively scientific"; of discounting "all considerations of popularity"; of working in a field that is "obviously independent of the consent of the majority"'; of having written a book, in short, for an essentially German as opposed to American audience.[686] In his view, he is but a physician diagnosing a patient. Just as he is not a "murderer," neither is the "doctor who announces the coming of an end;" for just as a doctor's diagnosis is nothing more or less than a statement of fact, so the *Essai*, he argues, is "devoid" of both "morality" and "anti-morality."[687] Inasmuch as the *Essai* is no different than "geology, medicine, archeology," he need not worry about either being accused of "murder" or worse, "slipping from the truth where one least ought to slip."[688] Again, as far as Gobineau is concerned, he is "mathematically certain about the correctitude of [his] propositions."[689]

But for Tocqueville, Gobineau is overlooking the fact that for the same reason the genre of history is not (and never will be) the equivalent of natural philosophy, Gobineau's methods are not (and never can be) "purely scientific"—that is, at least not in the way that he wants them to be. To the extent that what he is studying does not "stand in relation to laws of social science as stones to do laws of geology" means that the more

[686] "Gobineau to Tocqueville, October 15, 1854," *Correspondence*, 248.
[687] "Gobineau to Tocqueville, March 20, 1856," *Correspondence*, 285-286. See also "Gobineau to Tocqueville, May 1, 1856," *Correspondence*, 290. In this letter, Gobineau tells Tocqueville that nothing would make him happier than to see Tocqueville accept the argument that "morality is not engaged" in their debate, and that Gobineau's method of history is exactly as much opposed to evil as the methods of "Tacitus and Thucydides."
[688] Gobineau to Tocqueville, March 20, 1856," *Correspondence,* 286; Plato, *Republic*, 451a-b.
[689] Gobineau to Tocqueville, January 8, 1855, *Correspondence*, 249.

his method is 'German' the less accurate or true his philosophy or theory of history will actually be.[690] Insofar as human beings are not simply the blood in their veins (ie. reducible to mere matter) history—like social science in general—can never be, strictly speaking, devoid of either "morality" or "anti-morality." Like political science, history is and will always remain a moral science. In these fields, fact and value are not as separable as Gobineau would have us (and Tocqueville) believe.

In fact, they are not separable at all; as the example of Gobineau himself illustrates, the indifference towards practical consequences—the "moral obtuseness" necessary for "scientific analysis" common to modern social science, as Leo Strauss calls it—is *itself* the product of a moral preference.[691] In a letter dated October 15, 1854, Gobineau tells Tocqueville that while he regrets no longer living in "very intellectual times," his "work is little disturbed it." If anything, this "condition" has served only to clarify the choice that lies before him: he can either give up (throw himself into the "lake" of enfeebled minds that surround him); or soldier on ("go ahead…without the least concern for what is called public opinion"). For Gobineau, this choice is simple: "I am resolved," he tells Tocqueville, "to stick to the latter…"[692] Important to recognize, however, is that as simple as this choice appears to Gobineau, making it is hardly necessary—and therein lies the problem. According to Gobineau's view of social science, he need not be "resolved" to stick to anything, let alone to conducting science or pursuing the truth at the expense of "discounting all considerations of popularity." In accordance

[690] Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, 143.
[691] Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 18–19.
[692] "Gobineau to Tocqueville, October15, 1854," *Correspondence*, 248.

his view of social science, throwing oneself into a lake of enfeebled minds would be as respectable, as noble, as soldiering on. And yet, Gobineau tells Tocqueville that he is resolved to soldier on, nonetheless. The question that remains then is why. Why does Gobineau choose to continue his work in a world where such work, along with humanity itself, is apparently fated to disappear?

At first, the answer seems clear: like any other social scientist, he has a moral preference for the truth. In actuality, however, the answer is his moral preference for aristocracy—not just the truth as he claims. In his essay "What Is Political Philosophy?," Strauss remarks that he has "never met any scientific social scientist who apart from being dedicated to truth and integrity was not also wholeheartedly devoted to democracy."[693] But that is only because he never met a social scientist like Gobineau—a social scientist who, as we saw in the previous chapter, apart from being dedicated to truth and integrity was also wholeheartedly devoted to aristocracy. Like Strauss's social scientists, Gobineau is not as ethically neutral as he claims; for like social science in general, his *Essai* is not nearly as devoid of morality and anti-morality as he insists. In the Preface of the *Essai*, he basically admits as much when he tells us that despite "recognizing that both strong and weak races exist, *I preferred* to examine the former."[694] Gobineau's preference is hardly arbitrary. As a man who prided himself on "carrying the blood of Ottar Jarl, a Viking pirate who raided the coast of Normandy," it is not like his

[693] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 20.
[694] Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races*, xiv (emphasis mine).

"heart or his mind is torn between alternatives which in themselves are equally attractive."[695]

Like the 'German' resolve of his progressive rivals, then, the 'German' resolve of Gobineau also stems from an unstated, all too 'American' concern. What does not "disturb" Gobineau because he is devoted to discovering "intrinsic truths" in fact does not disturb him because he is in his heart of hearts an aristocrat: a partisan of inequality. The "evils" that, according to Tocqueville, his *Essai* is liable to perpetuate are in his view hardly evils at all.[696] On the contrary, they are goods that his *Essai* is meant to implicitly defend, despite being fated to disappear. Perhaps this is why despite his historical determinism, Tocqueville recognized in Gobineau a desire not just to interpret the world—not just to do what "philosophers" have hitherto done—but to actually change it.[697]

Still, rather than accuse Gobineau of cloaking his all too 'American' concern for aristocracy in a purely 'German' method, Tocqueville opts instead to simply criticize him for embracing a wholly 'German' method to begin with. In a letter dated December 20, 1853, Tocqueville already tells him that, although greatly interested in the *Essai*, "by studying German" he has "not yet become enough of a German to be captivated so much by the novelty or philosophical merits of an idea as to overlook its moral or political

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[695] Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, 89; Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 20.
[696] "Tocqueville to Gobineau, November 17, 1853," Correspondence, 229.
[697] Karl Marx, "Theses on Freuerbach," in The Marx-Engels Reader: Second Edition, 145; "Tocqueville to Gobineau, October 22, 1843," Correspondence, 211. As Tocqueville writes: "The only difference between you and me is that you have more ambition than I have. I limit myself to finding new consequences where you wish to discover absolutely new principles. You want to change the face of the world, nothing less. I am more modest."

effects."[698] Not surprisingly, therefore, in response to Gobineau's claim to be a "doctor," Tocqueville writes the following:

> In your penultimate letter you compare yourself to a physician who announces to his patient that he mortally ill. You ask: what is immoral in that? My answer is that even though this act in itself may not be immoral, its consequences assuredly are most immoral and pernicious. If one of these mornings my doctor were to say to me: 'My dear sir, I have the honor to announce that you are mortally ill and, inasmuch as all of your vital organs are affected, I must add that there is absolutely no chance for you to recover,' my first temptation would be to knock that doctor down. Thereafter I should think I would have no choice but either to pull the covers over myself and wait for the announced end or, if I possessed the temper which animated the circle of Boccaccio during the Florentine plague, to think of nothing else but to sample all the possible pleasures before this inevitable end, to burn, as they say, the candle at both ends. Or again, I could profit from this doctor's sentence by preparing myself for eternal life. But societies do not have eternal lives. Thus your doctor will certainly not number me among his clients. I must add that physicians, like philosophers, are often greatly mistaken in their prognostications. I have seen more than one person condemned by physicians who nevertheless became quite well subsequently and who angrily criticized the doctor for having uselessly frightened and discouraged him.[699]

As we saw in the previous chapter, Tocqueville's concern for the "practical consequences" of ideas has a way of making him look like a moralist and, to a significant extent, this passage seems only to further confirm that at the end of the day, a moralist is what he is. Even though the activity of the philosopher in itself may not be immoral, he argues, that activity can have very immoral and pernicious consequences, nonetheless. Accordingly, whereas Gobineau—in keeping with the Germans—subordinates practice to theory, effect to truth, Tocqueville—in keeping with the Americans—appears to do the opposite. Practical consequences and not the truth, it would seem, are his primary if not exclusive concern. But again, important to recognize is that while Tocqueville, unlike Gobineau, is obviously concerned about the practical consequences of ideas, this does not mean that he is by implication unconcerned with their philosophical merits (ie. that for

[698] "Tocqueville to Gobineau, December 20, 1853," *Correspondence*, 232.
[699] "Tocqueville to Gobineau, July 30, 1856," *Correspondence*, 291-292.

him, the truth simply does not matter). What it means, rather, is that when it comes to analyzing social and political reality—when it comes to studying a realm of reality that for whatever reason, consists of beings who neither appear to be *nor conceive of themselves as* wholly determined by "general and eternal laws"—the philosophical merits of a given idea are discernable *only by taking into account* its practical consequences. Lest Gobineau forget, although human affairs are much more indeterminate than, for instance, human biology, even physicians err. In effect, *even they* cannot afford to ignore the potentially pernicious, practical consequences associated with practicing their art. Just as prudent philosophers must always beware the city, so prudent physicians must always beware their patients—especially if it turns out that they are, like Gobineau, "slipping from the truth where one least ought to slip."[700]

Unlike Gobineau, therefore, Tocqueville simply rejects the view, characteristic of modern social science in general, that all forms of knowledge are equal—that the relationship between truth and science is as straightforward as Gobineau claims. "In Tocqueville's view, Gobineau wrongly conflates all forms of knowledge into one mold, equating truth in social science with, for example, in geology."[701] But again, insofar as human beings are not the equivalent of rocks, a book like the *Essai* can never be, in Tocqueville's view, the equivalent of a morally obtuse geological study. Just as "political science is a moral science, because the outcome of history changes as a result of human actions freely made," so too is the science of history.[702] For Tocqueville, this is obvious.

[700] Plato, *Republic*, 451a.
[701] Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, 143.
[702] Ceaser, 143.

In a letter dated November 17, 1853, he tells Gobineau that "after, for some time, one has observed the way in which public affairs are conducted," one cannot help but conclude that the "same causes which make for success in private life" make for success in public life, as well. "Do you think you can avoid the impression," he asks Gobineau,

> …that courage, energy, honesty, farsightedness, and common sense are the *real reasons* behind the prosperity of empires as well as behind the prosperity of private families; and that, in one word, the destiny of men, whether of individuals or nations, *depends on what they want them to be*?[703]

As we shall see below, despite what Tocqueville here argues, the destinies of individuals and nations do not *only*, in his view, depend on what men want them to be. But at the same time, they do not *only* depend on the determining influence of a single great cause (race), either, and this is Tocqueville's point. When it comes to interpreting historical change, the moral qualities of human beings—qualities that are reducible neither, for instance, to the "similitude of the passions" nor to the *un*similitude of the races—matter.[704] Such qualities not only affect but can often change the course of events thereby making history, like politics in general, much more contingent upon what men "want" than Gobineau is willing to acknowledge. Unlike the natural sciences, the science of history must therefore take the moral qualities of human beings into account.

## TOCQUEVILLE'S METHOD: NEITHER 'GERMAN' NOR 'AMERICAN'

Of course, from the perspective of Gobineau, Tocqueville's rejection of the view that all forms of knowledge, whether historical or geological, are equal is tantamount to an admission, on his part, that when it comes to analyzing social and political reality,

[703] "Tocqueville to Gobineau, November 17, 1853," *Correspondence*, 229 (emphasis mine).
[704] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction.3.

politics and history, the only thing which truly matters is practice—that the truth, in short, is important only insofar as it is effectual. Important to recognize, however, is that just as Tocqueville never became, by studying German, "enough of a German to be captivated so much by the novelty or philosophical merits of an idea as to overlook its moral or political effects," neither did he, by studying American democracy, become enough of an American to be captivated so much by the moral or political effects of an idea as to overlook its philosophical merits.

In Part 1, Volume 2, of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville divides "science"—by which he means not just natural science, but also social or political science—into three parts.[705] The first part of science "contains the most theoretical principles, the most abstract notions, the ones whose application is unknown or very distant."[706] As a result, it is a part of science cultivated by those who regard the pursuit of truth, whether about nature or social and political phenomena, as an end in itself and, as such, for the rare few who, like Gobineau, regard that pursuit as being above the fray of practice. It is a part of

[705] In an excised passage from this chapter, Tocqueville provides an "example" in order illustrate his broader thought. That example—which clearly confirms that by "science" he does not simply mean natural philosophy or science, is worth quoting in full. As Tocqueville writes:

"An example would make my thought easier to grasp: I would choose the science that I know best which is that of the laws. The distinctions that I have just indicated are found in the science of laws and I believe, without being able to assert it in so positive a way, that you should see at least the trace of those distinctions in all of the laws and principally in those that are called exact, because of the rigorous manner in which they proceed.

There is a science of laws whose object is lofty, speculative, general. The former works hard to find the rules by which human societies exist and to determine the laws that various peoples must impose on themselves in order to reach the goal that they propose for themselves.

There is a science of laws that, taking hold of a particular body of laws, or even of the higher portion of a body of laws, demonstrates what general principles dominate there and shows the economy that reigns and the overall view that is revealed.

There is a last one that enters into the administrative or judicial detail of the processes by which the legislator wanted to have his plans carried out, learns how political assemblies or the courts interpreted their will, and that teaches the art of making good the rights of each citizen with the aid of the laws" (777).

[706] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 777.

science for those who, like the Germans in general, are concerned exclusively with the philosophical merits of an idea and thus who subordinate practice to theory, effect to truth. The second part of science, argues Tocqueville, is "made up of general truths that, though still pure theory, lead nevertheless by a direct and short path to application."[707] It is a part of science cultivated by those for whom the pursuit of truth is neither an end in itself nor simply a means to an end because insofar as the cultivation of theory necessarily requires taking into account the practical consequences of ideas, the pursuit of truth cannot be absolutely separated from application. It is a part of science that, as we shall see, Tocqueville himself cultivates—a political scientist and historian for whom, unlike Gobineau, the pursuit of truth is never above the fray practice. Finally, the third part of science is concerned solely with the "processes of application and the means of execution fulfilled."[708] It is a part of science that as the mirror opposite of the first part, is cultivated by those who regard the pursuit of truth solely as a means to an end. It is for those who, like the Americans in general, conflate what is true with what is useful or effectual and thus who subordinate theory to practice, science to pragmatism.

Now, according to Tocqueville each of these parts of science can be "cultivated separately…"[709] But as he proceeds to argue, none can "prosper for long" when "separated absolutely from the other two"—and for the following reason: whereas when separated absolutely from the cultivation of practice, the cultivation of theory is liable to degenerate into the construction of "probably quite false" absolute systems, when

[707] Tocqueville, 777.
[708] Tocqueville, 777.
[709] Tocqueville, 778.

separated absolutely from the cultivation of theory, the cultivation of practice is liable to stall completely and degenerate into barbarism.

As we saw in Chapter 4, when separated from any concern for practical consequences, the cultivation of theory—especially as it relates to social and political phenomena—is liable to run amok; Gobineau's *Essai* is the case in point. Yet, as intimated above, Gobineau's *Essai* is hardly the only example of a book that illustrates what Tocqueville is getting at. One need only read Book 5 of Plato's *Republic* in order to recognize that theorizing without a concern for what is "possible," never mind what is "best," can be a dangerous activity, whether it entails the creation of a "probably quite false" absolute system or not.[710] True, it may be that in times of equality philosophers find it no longer necessary "to envelop their opinions in veils of allegory."[711] But this does not mean that cultivating theory should be done without a view to practice whatsoever; for according to Tocqueville, just as the cultivation of good practice depends on remaining open to general ideas introduced by theory, so the cultivation of good theory depends on paying heed to limits imposed by practice.

Not surprisingly, therefore, in *The Ancien Regime* Tocqueville takes to task those men for whom, prior to the Revolution, cultivating theory without a view to actual practice became a "defining occupation."[712] Lest one assume that, because these men had no authority and fulfilled no public function, they too were simply the social equivalent of physicists—scientists focused exclusively on pursuing the truth for its own sake—

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[710] Plato, *Republic,* 450c-d.
[711] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 423. As far as I know, this is the only passage in any of Tocqueville's works where he alludes to the art of esoteric writing.
[712] Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, 127.

Tocqueville here reveals that contrary to their "German counterparts," politics was in fact their primary concern.[713] Still, that these men were actually interested in politics did not mean that they, unlike their German counterparts, had anymore awareness of, let alone respect for, the important relationship between the cultivation of theory, on the one hand, and practical consequences, on the other. On the contrary, just as their German counterparts were content to focus solely on the novelty or philosophical merits of an idea, so too were they; for as Tocqueville goes on to explain, despite taking an avid interest in politics, none of these men actually had any appreciation for the realities of "practical life." As Tocqueville writes:

> The situation of these writers fostered in them a taste for abstract, general theories of government, theories in which they trusted blindly. Living as they did almost totally removed from practical life, they had no experience that might have tempered their natural passions. Nothing warned them of the obstacles that existing realities might pose to even the most desirable reforms. They had no idea of the perils that invariably accompany even the most necessary revolutions. Indeed, they had no premonition of them because the complete absence of political liberty ensured that they not only failed to grasp the world of affairs but actually failed to see it. They had nothing to do with that world and were incapable of recognizing what others did within it. Hence, they lacked even that superficial instruction that the sight of a free society and word of what is said by free men impart to those least involved in government.[714]

As Tocqueville here reveals, although they had a keen interest in the world of affairs, in practical life, none of these writers actually had any real or in-depth understanding of it. How could they? According to Tocqueville, "the complete absence of political liberty" in pre-Revolutionary France made it so hardly anyone did. Consequently, upon turning to the cultivation of theory, they cultivated it without even a "superficial" appreciation for the realities of the practical life—which is also to say that they did not really "cultivate" theory at all.

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[713] Tocqueville, 127.
[714] Tocqueville, 129.

Again, as we saw in the previous chapter, insofar as cultivating theory depends on forming general ideas, it in part depends on employing the imagination. It depends on imagining that which man, unlike God, cannot fully "see": the whole of reality and, in particular, man's place in it. Yet, according to Tocqueville, forming general ideas alone is not enough. In addition to imagining that which man, unlike God, cannot fully see, cultivating theory requires constantly testing those ideas against "particular facts," and then *revising the former in accordance with the latter*. Let us recall that as necessary for cultivating theory as general ideas are, they do not attest to the strength of human intelligence but its "insufficiency." Because nothing in nature, argues Tocqueville, is "exactly the same"; because there are no "identical facts"; because "no rules" apply "indiscriminately and in the same way to several matters at once"; general ideas are at best only ever useful *approximations* of the truth.[715] They are "means by the aid of which men advance toward truth, but without ever finding it."[716] As a result, for Tocqueville cultivating theory depends not just on forming general ideas, but also and more importantly, on *knowing how* to form general ideas.

In an editorial note to his prolonged discussion on "the aptitude and taste for general ideas" in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville observes that the "the man who puts forth general ideas is exposed to two great dangers from the perspective of criticism."[717] The first is a danger "common to all those put forth ideas, which is that they are false and it is noticed." The second, however, is a danger that is less common, which

[715] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 728.
[716] Tocqueville, 728.
[717] Tocqueville, 730.

is that these ideas allow for "particular cases to escape."[718] According to Tocqueville, the more an idea is general, the more particular cases escape it, the more outliers there are. Hence, whereas the existence of a "very great number of particular cases opposed to a general idea would prove that the idea is false," the existence of a few prove that, however true a general idea may be, it still falls short of being completely true.[719] In order to form general ideas that are truer than they are false, then, one must learn how to insulate them from these two "great dangers." One must learn the art of weighing their generality, on the one hand, against the number of particular cases (facts) that escape them, on the other.

But herein lies the problem: the writers to whom Tocqueville is referring above never learned, let alone mastered, this art because in keeping with their German counterparts, they never developed any appreciation for the realities of practical life. Immediately following his prolonged discussion on the aptitude and taste for general ideas in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville explains why the French, like the Germans, exhibit such an inordinate passion for general ideas, especially when it comes to politics. Unlike the Americans and the English, the French and the Germans, he observes, were never able to "run public affairs by themselves."[720] They were never able to immerse themselves in the realities of practical life. As a result, unlike the English and the Americans, they never learned to "rectify" their general ideas "by experience."[721] "In England," writes Tocqueville, "those who wrote about government mingled with those

[718] Tocqueville, 731.
[719] Tocqueville, 730.
[720] Tocqueville, 738.
[721] Tocqueville, 738.

who governed, so that the latter introduced new ideas in practice while the former revised and pared down theories with the help of facts."[722] Similarly, in America, those who wrote the Declaration of Independence, the Federalist Papers, and the Constitution, were themselves those who governed. In both England and America, then, the cultivation of theory *and* the cultivation of practice prospered because whereas theory was cultivated with a view to the limits imposed by practice, practice was cultivated with a view to general ideas introduced by theory. Insofar as in these countries, the cultivation of theory was never separated absolutely from the cultivation of practice, in these countries, theory never became untethered from social and political reality as it did in France. As Tocqueville writes:

> …in France the political world remained divided, as it were, into two separate provinces with no commerce between them. One administered while the other established the abstract principles that should have formed the basis of all administration. One took specific measures, as routine required; the other proclaimed general laws without ever thinking about the means to apply them. One took charge of public affairs, the other of people's minds.
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> On top of the real society, whose constitution remained traditional, confused, and haphazard, and in which laws were still diverse and contradictory, ranks clearly defined, conditions fixed, and tax burdens unequal, an imaginary society was constructed piece by piece, in which everything seemed simple and coherent, uniform, equitable, and shaped by reason.
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> Gradually, the imagination of the multitude deserted the former and retreated into the latter. People lost interest in what was in order to dream about what might be, and in their minds they lived in the ideal city that the writers had constructed.[723]

Here, Tocqueville shows what happens when the cultivation of theory is "separated absolutely" from the cultivation of practice: the imagination takes over and reality is eclipsed; the real gives way to the ideal; absolute systems in which literally nothing is left to chance because "everything" is made to seem "simple, coherent, and uniform," are

[722] Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, 133.
[723] Tocqueville, 133.

born. The cultivation of theory, in short, degenerates into system building of the kind that democratic historians, as we have seen, are liable to engage in.

And yet, just as cultivating theory without a view to actual practice is liable to degenerate into the construction of "probably quite false" absolute systems, so the cultivation of practice without a view to theory is, according to Tocqueville, liable to result in the degeneration of civilization into barbarism. At the end of his chapter on the "application of the sciences" in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville argues that, despite what many people now believe, it is entirely possible that what happened to Roman civilization could happen to civilization again.[724] The only difference is that this time it will happen, not as a result of being physically destroyed by barbarians, but rather, of cultivating practice in the same way that the Germans tend to cultivate theory.

As an example, one need only consider China. When the Europeans arrived in China, observes Tocqueville, they found a nation in which the cultivation of theory—in both its more and less applicable forms—had vanished. To be sure, like any other people, the Chinese had certain "methods;" they had certain ways of conducting their affairs. But as Tocqueville points out, while following the path of their fathers, "they had forgotten the reasons that guided the latter…

> …They were forced to imitate their fathers always and in *all things*, in order not to throw them- selves into impenetrable shadows, if they diverged for an instant from the road that the latter had marked. The source of human knowledge had nearly dried up; and although the river still flowed, it could no longer swell its waves or change its course.[725]

In effect, whereas in France, the cultivation of theory devolved into the construction of imaginary systems that, in time, made "change" or revolution inevitable, in China, the

[724] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 785.
[725] Tocqueville, 786.

human imagination (and therewith it, the cultivation of theory) practically disappeared which, in time, made "change" literally impossible, preservation perpetual.[726] There, revolutions were "very rare, and war was so to speak unknown." It became a society where "tranquility without happiness, industry without progress, stability without strength, [and] physical order without public morality" reigned. It became, according to Tocqueville, barbaric.[727]

Accordingly, just as Tocqueville takes to task those men for whom, prior to the Revolution, cultivating theory without a view to actual practice became a "defining occupation," so he cautions against becoming *too much* like the Americans—a people for whom the cultivation of practice without a view to theory is essentially habitual. To be sure, when it comes to explaining why there is "no country in the civilized world" where "there less interest in philosophy than in the United States," Tocqueville paints a complicated and, to a certain extent, contradictory, picture. On the one hand, he argues that although the Americans are democratic, their example does not necessarily prove that democratic peoples are liable to abandon, as did the Chinese, cultivating theory altogether. On the contrary, all it proves is that when it comes to cultivating or rather, *not* cultivating theory, the Americans are outliers: if not for their "proximity to Europe," he writes, they too would "fall into barbarism; a thousand particular causes, of which I have been able to show only the principal ones, had to concentrate the American mind in a singular way in the concern for purely material things…"[728] On the other hand, however,

[726] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 10.
[727] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 786.
[728] Tocqueville, 768.

Tocqueville admits that "if the democratic social-state and democratic institutions do not stop the development of the human mind, it is at least incontestable that they lead it in one direction rather than another;" the philosophical method of the Americans or democratic man all but makes this inevitable.[729] Insofar as this method fosters in human beings a taste for the material, the empirical, and the useful, it focuses the human mind almost exclusively on the realities of practical life. True, this method prevents people from getting "lost in utopias"—that is, at least insofar as utopias present themselves as such and do not cloak themselves, like the ones constructed by democratic historians, in "the real." However, by focusing the mind almost entirely on the realities of practical life, this method also causes people to doubt, if not deny, the existence of truth understood as something that is distinct from effects, altogether. It is no coincidence that pragmatism, a philosophy which essentially holds that what is "true" is what "works," was founded in America.[730] The philosophical method of democratic man causes the mind to conflate what is true with what is useful which, as Tocqueville's reflections on the utility of religion illustrate, are not always the same.[731]

Despite how Gobineau interprets Tocqueville's concern for practical consequences, then, in his own method Tocqueville is in fact no more 'American' than he

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[729] Tocqueville, 776.

[730] For an analysis of the origins of pragmatism, see Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism.* University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. I place the word "works" in quotations because what works ultimately requires answering, in one way or another, the much more philosophical question of how human beings should live, first. By itself, therefore, what "works" has no self-evident meaning.

[731] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 744. As Tocqueville writes, "There are very false and very absurd religions. You can say however that every religion that remains within the circle that I have just pointed out and that does not claim to go outside of it, as several have tried to do in order to stop the free development of the human mind in all directions, imposes a salutary yoke on the intellect; and it must be recognized that, if religion does not save men in the other world, it is at least very useful to their happiness and to their grandeur in this one."

is 'German' because, insofar as he is neither a "social scientist" of the kind that Gobineau aspires to be, nor simply a "moralist," but rather, a *political philosopher*, he is in a sense both. In his Speech Given to the Annual Public Meeting of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in 1852, Tocqueville takes up the question of whether a "science of politics" can even be said to exist; for according to "political men," it does not: "There is something rather puerile, they have said, in imagining that there is a particular art that teaches one to govern. The field of politics is too varied and volatile to permit one to place there the foundations of science."[732] Himself a political man, Tocqueville certainly understands where these "political men" are coming from. Inasmuch as they remain immersed in practical life, all they see are the particular facts that escape the general ideas on which theory is predicated; all they see is the contingent. Moreover, like Machiavelli before them, they rightly observe that anyone who tries to govern with the "aid of theories and maxims formed while studying philosophy and history" would in all likelihood fail.[733] To do this would be to embrace a form of dogmatism at the expense of ignoring what governing effectively requires: pragmatism. Even so, however, Tocqueville is convinced that while these men are no doubt correct to observe that practice differs from theory—that the art of governing differs from political science—they are wrong to therefore conclude that "political science" is either "chimerical" or "vain." For as he eventually tells his audience, "barbarians are the only people who recognize nothing but practice in politics."[734] The truth, however, is that there is more to

[732] Alexis de Tocqueville, "Speech Given to the Annual Public Meeting of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences on April 3, 1852," 17.
[733] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 61.
[734] Tocqueville, "Speech Given to the Annual Public Meeting of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences on April 3, 1852," 20.

politics than meets the practical eye. As the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and even Machiavelli himself illustrate, when it comes to human affairs, there is an important connection between theory and practice, truth and effect, such that the former is never totally removed from the latter and vice versa, and hence regardless of what certain men of thought, on the one hand, and men of action, on the other, might otherwise claim.

But alas, herein lies the reason for so much of the confusion surrounding not only the methodological contours of Tocqueville's "new science of politics," but also, his "profoundly ambiguous" theory of history, as well. Although Tocqueville, unlike most men of action, clearly believes that political science is possible, like Plato, Aristotle, and even Machiavelli himself, he never provides a systematic explanation of his own. In the Introduction to *Democracy in America*, he famously declares that a "new science of politics is needed for a world entirely new." But as Harvey Mansfield observes, although that declaration…

> …could hardly be more prominent, as an implied promise it is disappointing because Tocqueville never delivers the new political science. More cautiously, one could say that he never directly tells his readers what that political science is, what is wrong with the existing political science, and why political science is needed. Nonetheless, there is good reason to think that the new political science is in that book, and elsewhere in Tocqueville's writings, and that he left it implicit and scattered rather than explain it systematically, also for good reason.[735]

That Tocqueville never delivers on his implied promise to provide a systematic explanation of his new science of politics continues to foment debate over his method as a "social scientist," just as his "profoundly ambiguous" theory of history continues to foment debate over his method as a historian.[736] But just as Tocqueville's failure to

[735] Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, "Tocqueville's New Political Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Cheryl B. Welch (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 81.
[736] See, for instance, Saguiv A. Hadari, *Theory in Practice: Tocqueville's New Science of Politics* (Stanford University Press, 1989), 3; Jon Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville, the First Social Scientist*; and Aurelian

deliver on this implied promise to provide a systematic explanation of his new science of politics does not mean that he has no political science, so his failure to systematically elaborate a philosophically coherent theory of historical change does not mean that he does not have a theory of history. For the same reason he leaves his political science "implicit and scattered," he leaves his theory of history implicit and scattered, as well. To do otherwise would be to analyze historical change in a way that prioritizes the "logic of ideas" at the expense of ignoring their practical consequences, and thus writing about history in a way that not only runs the risk of ignoring the irreducibly complex nature of social and political reality, but as a direct result, that endangers the preservation of liberty and human dignity in a democratic age. To do otherwise, in sum, would be to embrace an approach to analyzing social and political phenomena that given the inextricable relationship between the philosophical merits of ideas, on the one hand, and their practical consequences, on the other, Tocqueville deliberately rejects.[737]

What, then, is Tocqueville's approach to analyzing social and political phenomena? What is his method? Essentially, it is what Pierre Manent and Catherine Zuckert, among others, identify as "political sociology," an approach to analyzing social and political phenomena that strives to combine—if not fully reconcile—two otherwise

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Crăiuțu, "What Kind of Social Scientist Was Tocqueville?" in *Conversations with Tocqueville: The Global Democratic Revolution in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Aurelian Crăiuțu (Lexington Books, 2009), 55-81.

[737] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 31. "Nor must it be forgotten," he writes, "that the author who wants to make himself understood is obliged to push each of his ideas to all of their theoretical consequences, and often to the limits of what is false and impractical; for if it is sometimes necessary to step back from the rules of logic in actions, you cannot do the same in discourses, and man finds it almost as difficult to be inconsistent in his words as he normally finds it to be consistent in his actions."

opposed traditions: sociology, on the one hand, and politics, on the other.[738] According to Manent, although these two traditions can, with success, be combined, they nevertheless tend in opposite directions. Whereas the overwhelming tendency of sociology is to identify "causal necessities" (general causes, as Tocqueville refers to them) and thus subordinate the political to the pre-political (to climate, geography, race, economics relations, the spirit of civilization), the overwhelming tendency of politics is to affirm the causal influence of human agency and thus subordinate the pre-political to the political.[739] Simply put, whereas the former tends towards Marx and is therefore 'German,' the latter tends towards Aristotle and is therefore much more 'American.' As we shall see next, however, insofar as Tocqueville follows neither in the methodological footsteps of the Restoration liberals (who, if we recall, Engels identifies as being instrumental in the development of the Marxist conception of history), nor the methodological footsteps of Aristotle (a philosopher for whom "the most authoritative and most architectonic [art]…appears to be the political one"), but rather, in the methodological in the footsteps of Montesquieu, Tocqueville's theory of history, like his approach to analyzing social and political reality more generally, tends towards neither because it paradoxically, tends towards both.[740]

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MONTESQUIEU: TOCQUEVILLE ON CAUSALITY IN HISTORY

[738] See Catherine Zuckert, "Political Sociology versus Speculative Philosophy," 121-152; Pierre Manent, "Tocqueville, Political Philosopher," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. by Cheryl Welch (Cambridge University Press, 2006) 108-120; and Melvin Richter "Tocqueville and Guizot On Democracy: From a Type of Society to a Regime," *History of European Ideas* No. 30 (2004): 61–82.
[739] Manent, "Tocqueville, Political Philosopher," 109-111.
[740] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a28.

In a letter written to de Kergorlay in 1850, Tocqueville expresses his desire to write a new book that would eventually become *The Ancien Regime*—his final major work and the closest thing to a history he actually wrote.[741] Before he discusses "the subject" of this book, however, he briefly reflects on why he has never been in a better position to write it. If spending the last ten years in politics has taught him anything, he explains, it is that his "real worth" lies "primarily in works of the mind." "I am better in thought than in action," he tells de Kergorlay, "and if any trace of my passage in this world is to remain, it will be in the form of what I have written rather than the memory of what I have done."[742] Still, as he goes on to observe, although his "real worth" lies in producing "works of the mind," that worth has paradoxically less to with his inability to put ideas into practice than it does with his ability to cultivate theory with a view to the latter. While the last ten years have no doubt been a political failure, they have nonetheless given him "a more practical sense of details without depriving [his] mind of the habit of contemplating the affairs of men in the aggregate."[743] As a result, he is confident that whatever his failings in politics, he is in a "better position now than when [he] wrote *Democracy in America* to treat an important topic in political literature."[744] The only questions that remain are what that important topic will be, and how it should be treated.

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[741] I say "the closest thing to a history" because in the very first sentence of *The Ancien Regime*, Tocqueville goes out of his way to tell his readers that "This book is not a history of the French Revolution, which has been recounted too brilliantly for me to contemplate doing it again. It is rather a study of that Revolution" (1).
[742] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 255.
[743] Tocqueville, 255.
[744] Tocqueville, 255.

As for the answer to the first question, Tocqueville tells de Kergorlay that he wants to write on the very topic that another democratic historian and colleague of his, Adolphe Thiers, wrote on his twenty-one volume *History of the Consulate and the Empire*: "the long drama of the French Revolution;" "the vast stretch of time that extends from 1789 to the present."[745] In a conversation with William Nassau Senior four months earlier, Tocqueville had already expressed his disappointment with Theirs' *History*. "Its negative defect," he thought, was "its inadequate appreciation of the causes, intrinsic and extrinsic, which united to form Napoleon." "Few histories," he told his friend, "give to these two sets of causes their due, or their relative weight. Some attribute too much to the circumstances in which their hero is placed, others to the accidents of his character"—and Thiers' *History* was apparently no different. [746] Because Thiers failed to give these two sets of causes their relative weight, he failed to sufficiently explain how it was that Napoleon was able to do what he did and why it was that he chose to do it.[747] Consequently, Tocqueville not only thought that "The History of the Empire and the Consulate [was] still to be written," but also, that he should be the one to write it. His sharpened sense details combined with his ability to contemplate the affairs of men in the aggregate made him uniquely qualified to do just that.

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[745] Tocqueville, 256.
[746] In his *Recollections*, Tocqueville makes this same point but without specific reference to Thiers: "I have known literary men who have written history without taking part in government, and I have known political men whose only concern has been to shape events without a thought to describing them. I have often remarked that the former see general causes everywhere, while the latter, who daily experience a myriad of disconnected occurrences, readily imagine that everything can be attributed to specific incidents and that the little strings they are constantly pulling are the ones that move the world. Both are surely wrong" (45).
[747] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Correspondence and Conversations of Alexis de Tocqueville with Nassau William Senior from 1834-1859, Vol. 1*, ed. by M.C.M. Simpson (Henry S. King & Co., 1872), 112-113

As for the answer to the second question, then, Tocqueville tells de Kergorlay that unlike Thiers, he will treat this subject not by writing a history of the Revolution in the "strict sense," but rather, by writing a book that comprises "a set of reflections and judgments about that history."[748] He would of course "record the facts and trace their sequence," but his "main purpose would not be to recount them." His main purpose, rather, would be to "explain the most important facts and expose their various causes and consequences." His main purpose would be to do what over a hundred years earlier, Montesquieu had done in his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*: combine "history in the narrow sense" with what Tocqueville calls "historical philosophy," recount the particular so as to identify and make judgements about the general.[749]

Now, it is important to recognize that although Tocqueville singles out Montesquieu's *Considerations* as his model, Montesquieu was not the only historian who influenced his approach to analyzing historical change. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 2 and, as alluded to above, he also admired Guizot, whose lectures on the history of civilization in Europe he began attending in 1828 in Paris.[750] Upon beginning his legal

[748] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 257.
[749] Tocqueville, 257.
[750] Aurelian Crăiuțu, *Liberalism Under Siege*, 98–99. As Crăiuțu observes, "There are few references to Guizot's works in Tocqueville's early writings and letters, but the ones that we have demonstrate his strong admiration for Guizot, whose courses on the history of civilization in France and Europe he attended in 1829–30. In a letter written on August 30, 1829, Tocqueville informed his friend, Gustave de Beaumont, that he had devoted all his time to reading the historical and political works of Guizot, whom he found "truly prodigious" in analysis of ideas and in choice of words; he also proposed that they reread Guizot the following winter. When Tocqueville asked for a copy of Guizot's *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* a week after his arrival in New York in May 1831, it was supposed to help him find the most suitable method for understanding American society. It is important to note Tocqueville's interest in Guizot's sociological method from which he drew inspiration when analyzing the spirit of (American) democracy as reflected in its mores, opinions, laws, and other "monuments of intelligence."

career in1824, Tocqueville asked a former teacher of his, M. Mougin, for some advice and was told, among other things, to study history: "the most necessary and the most difficult" of studies.[751] But it was not until 1828 when he began attending Guizot's lectures on the history of civilization in Europe that he began to take this most necessary and difficult of studies seriously. While attending these lectures, he apparently became "enamored" with Guizot's analytical method—a method that, similar to Montesquieu's, was also much more "philosophical" than "narrow."[752]

Still, for all of his admiration of Guizot, Tocqueville was nonetheless critical of certain aspects of his method and, in particular, of his teleology as a historian.[753] In a letter to Beaumont dated October 5, 1828, Tocqueville offers his "reflections on English history" and, in so doing, implicitly criticizes both Guizot's method and his teleology.[754] As far as Guizot's method was concerned, Tocqueville thought it placed too much emphasis on the determining influence of general causes and decisive events. "Historians have a passion for decisive events," he writes. "One must admit that they are very convenient. An event like that makes an excellent starting point; your purposes set once for all, you have only to give a straightforward, frank, account of the ensuing consequences. What could be better? But unfortunately this world's affairs do not always go like that."[755] In effect, while Tocqueville thought that Guizot's work was "truly prodigious," he also "thought that Guizot did not give enough amplitude to the decisive,

[751] Andre Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 60.
[752] Robert T. Gannett, Jr., *Tocqueville Unveiled*, 20–21.
[753] Gannett, Jr., 21.
[754] Gannett, Jr., 19.
[755] Alexis de Tocqueville, "Reflections on English History," in *Journeys to England and Ireland*, ed. J.P. Mayer (Transaction Publishers, 1988), 24.

even if accidental, interventions of important leaders in revolutionary times, and, indeed, in earlier periods."[756] As for Guizot's teleology, Tocqueville found this just as troubling. Later on his letter to Beaumont, he observes that "There are many people, both among those who have studied English history and those who have not, who suppose that the English constitution has passed through various regular, successive stages until it has reached the point where it now is. *According to them it is a fruit which every age has helped to ripen*." But as goes to write, "That is not my view and I shall be very surprised if it is yours when you have read all English history carefully. No doubt you will agree with me that there comes a moment when the forward movement is not only stopped *but gives way to a most marked retrogression*."[757]

Despite also believing that the Revolution was inevitable, then, Tocqueville never interpreted its inevitability as evidence of the fact that history was progressive. As we saw above, like the Restoration liberals, Tocqueville also subjects the doctrine of Providence to an empirical test and thus also strips God's will of its hidden or mysterious nature. At the same time, however, he never goes so far as to replace Providence with progress which, as we saw in Chapter 2, both Guizot and Thierry do. Why? Because Tocqueville apparently recognized that to do so would be to informally embrace a doctrine of fatality or historical determinism that made it impossible to interpret the past as anything other than wholly necessitated. For Guizot, "political authority had to pass through a despotic phase in order to achieve social and national unity."[758] In keeping with

[756] Mitchell, *Individual Choice and the Structures of History*, 36.
[757] Tocqueville, "Reflections on English History," *Journeys*, 37 (emphasis mine).
[758] Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty,* 36.

"Saint-Simon, he alluded to the general course of events or suggested that despotism, like anarchy, in the end served the cause of progress."[759] But for Tocqueville, interpreting history as a series of successive stages—each following the next—rendered otherwise regrettable, condemnable, events like the Terror as not only necessary, but also, just.[760] It conflated the "ought" with the "is," what should have been with what was, and therefore did precisely what Hegel's monstrous system, as we saw in the previous chapter, did: at once condoned tyranny and revolution. According to Crăiuțu, rather than view Guizot as a historical determinist, "It would be more accurate to argue that in Guizot's writings, the ideas of progress and necessity were more an expression of providentialism than determinism."[761] But as Tocqueville himself recognized, upon embracing the idea of progress one necessarily *slips into* historical determinism because the idea of historical progress, unlike the idea of providence, cannot be defended on the basis of faith alone. It stands or falls on the idea that history is governed by a law akin to the law of gravity: a law which guarantees the movement of history towards an "immense grandeur at the end of the long course humanity must still cover."[762] To embrace the modern idea of progress, therefore, is necessarily to embrace historical determinism, whether one is cognizant of it or not.

While developing his own theory of history, therefore, Tocqueville turned away from Guizot and towards Montesquieu—a philosopher who, although no less instrumental in the development of the philosophy of history than Voltaire, never

[759] Crossley, *French Historians and Romanticism*, 87.
[760] Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, 36.
[761] Crăiuțu, *Liberalism Under Siege*, 69.
[762] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 761.

embraced the idea of progress and so never tried to identify in history, "some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts." As J.B. Bury explains:

> Montesquieu was not among the apostles of the idea of Progress. It never secured any hold upon his mind. But he had grown in the same intellectual climate in which that idea was produced; he had been nurtured both on the dissolving, dialectic of Bayle, and on the Cartesian enunciation of natural law. And his work contributed to the service, not of the doctrine of the past, but of the doctrine of the future.
>
> For he attempted to extend Cartesian theory to social facts. He laid down that political, like physical, phenomena are subject to general laws. He had already conceived this, his most striking and important idea, when he wrote the *Considerations on the Greatness and Decadence of the Romans* (1734), in which he attempted to apply it:
>
> 'It is not Fortune who governs the world, as we see from the history of Romans. There are general causes, moral or physical, which operate in every monarchy, raise it, maintain it, or overthrow it; all that occurs is subject to these causes; and if a particular cause, like the accidental result of a battle, has ruined a state, there was a general cause which made the downfall of this state ensue from a single battle. In a word, the principal movement draws with it all the particular occurrences.'[763]

As we saw in Chapter 2, by updating/replacing Bossuet's *Discours* with his *Essai,* Voltaire in effect replaced of the doctrine of Providence with the doctrine of progress, the theology of history with the first "philosophy of history." As Bury here points out, however, Voltaire was not the only one to discredit Bossuet's treatment of history; Montesquieu did the same. For just as his theory of historical causality precludes the idea that fortune governs the world, so it "dispenses with Providence, design, and final causes."[764] Still, as Bury also observes, unlike Voltaire Montesquieu never became an apostle of the idea of progress. While he therefore replaces providence with general causes, he does not replace it with a law of history akin to the law of gravity: a single "superior force." To do would be to embrace a form of the same "dogma of the necessity of human actions" that, as we saw in the previous chapter, he criticizes. Accordingly, despite also advancing the idea that political, like physical, phenomena were subject to

[763] Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 102–3.
[764] Bury, 103.

impersonal forces (whether it be the climate, geography, the nature of institutions, or mores), Montesquieu never applied that idea in such a way as to also—whether wittingly or unwittingly—advance the notion that history was progressive. He applied that idea in such a way as to advance the notion that history "passed through various regular, successive stages, only to reach the point where it now is." On the contrary, all he did was posit the notion that because particular or secondary causes, "like the accidental result of a battle," are subject to more general ones (whether moral or physical), history is not so much governed by fortune as it is by "principal movements" which draw with them "all the particular occurrences."

While he therefore rejects the idea that history is a product of chance, Montesquieu does not go so far as to eliminate the phenomenon of accident from social and political reality altogether—and neither did Tocqueville.[765] As we saw in Chapter 2, included in Tocqueville's chapter on historians in democratic centuries is a lengthy editorial note in he which tells us that "there are two ideas in this chapter which must not be confused," both of which have to do with the question of what, exactly, qualifies as an "accident."[766] On the one hand, he explains, an accident is the influence that a powerful

[765] David Carrithers, "Montesquieu and Tocqueville as Philosophical Historians: Liberty, Determinism and the Prospects of Freedom" in *Montesquieu and His Legacy*, edited by Rebecca E. Kingston (State University of New York Press, 2009), 152. As Carrithers observes, "The key question for philosophical historians is whether there are general causes predetermining historical outcomes, or whether the decisive role belongs to human agents and unpredictable contingencies. Over time, three sorts of responses have been developed to this basic question. A determinist position posits that whatever the precise historical moment, there are always present an array of general causes sweeping historical events along in a necessitous direction. A diametrically opposed position posits that underlying causal forces are never so strong as to displace the primacy of the unpredictable decisions made by kings, statesmen, legislative assemblies—and sometimes crowds. A third position blending the two others suggests that historical outcomes are sometimes the result of underlying general causes, sometimes the consequence of the unpredictable actions of human beings, and sometimes the combined result of the two. Montesquieu and Tocqueville both adopted versions of the third position."

[766] Tocqueville, 855.

individual, "like Napoleon," can exert over the "destiny of a people."[767] That such an individual's influence is never, strictly speaking, *necessary* or fated means that at a fundamental level it remains undetermined ie. a function of chance as opposed to necessity. On the other hand, however, an accident can also be something that, according Tocqueville, is "due" completely to "chance," such as a "plague" or "the loss of a battle;" for just as the spread of a plague is, at the end of day, beyond the control of any one doctor so the loss of a battle is beyond the control of any one field commander. Yet, for Tocqueville as for Montesquieu, that which is "accidental"—whether it be a plague or the actions of a statesman—does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it occurs within the context of "principle movements" created by a concatenation of general causes that by working together *just so happen* to make certain events like the fall of Rome or the Revolution, inevitable. For as Tocqueville writes in his *Recollections*:

> …I believe that many important historical facts can be explained only by accidental circumstances, while many others remain inexplicable, and finally, that chance—or, rather, that skein of secondary causes that we call chance because we cannot untangle them—plays a major part in everything that takes places on the world stage. But I also firmly believe that chance accomplishes nothing for which the groundwork has not been laid in advance. Prior facts, the nature of institutions, the cast of people's minds, and the state of mores are the materials out of which chance improvises the effects we find so surprising and terrible to behold.[768]

This is the most direct and comprehensive statement that Tocqueville makes regarding his own theory of history, and it clearly conveys his methodological indebtedness to Montesquieu. Unlike democratic historians for whom showing how facts happened is "not enough," Tocqueville, as we can see, refuses to eliminate the phenomenon of chance from social and political reality altogether. He believes that "many historical facts can be

[767] Tocqueville, 855.
[768] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 45.

explained by *only* accidental circumstances, while others remain inexplicable." Yet, by accidental circumstances, it turns out, he does not simply mean effects without causes: that which Aristotle declares an absurdity. For him, chance is a "skein of secondary causes *that we call chance* because we cannot untangle them." Chance is that part of reality which man, because he is not God, necessarily remains blind to but can imagine nonetheless. While it therefore plays a major part in everything that takes place on the world stage, it does not govern that stage any more than fortune, according to Montesquieu, governs the world. For Tocqueville as for Montesquieu, chance "accomplishes nothing for which the groundwork has not been laid in advance." For Tocqueville as for Montesquieu, there are general causes—some physical, others moral—that chance understood as an unintelligible "skein of secondary causes" nevertheless operates in tandem with. General causes make up a canvas of necessity on which chance—a causal category under which Tocqueville places the influence of individuals—then paints the scene of history.

## TOCQUEVILLE AND THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL AND PREDESTINATION

Now, whether this understanding causality of history does not *itself* fall prey to a form, however soft, of historical determinism is another question. For to define chance as a "skein of secondary causes that we call chance because we cannot untangle them" is essentially to affirm the idea that what *appears* accidental is just that: an appearance. In other words, it is essentially to argue that chance is not so much a nebulous phenomenon, the existence of which refutes the Enlightenment assumption that history, like nature, is rational, as it is a *stand-in-word* for that which human reason, given its limits, cannot

fully explain but *potentially could*. Despite claiming that his theory of history is "perfectly compatible" with human freedom, therefore, Tocqueville's theory of history nevertheless succumbs to the same problem that any theory of history which strives to make historical change intelligible succumbs to: the fundamentally theological problem of free will and predestination.

In the very first sentence of his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, Kant raises this problem in the same way that Tocqueville does, as we have seen, in his correspondence with Gobineau. No, he does not speak of free will in religious terms; for he does not speak of free will in relation to God's omnipotence and omniscience. Instead, he writes that "Whatever conception of the freedom of the will one may form in terms of metaphysics, the will's manifestations in the world of phenomena, i.e. human actions, are determined in accordance with *natural laws*, as is every other natural event."[769] Nevertheless, the problem is essentially the same and for the following the reason: as applied to human actions, the idea of necessity—that natural laws determine human behavior as they do every other natural event—does to free will precisely what the theological concept of predestination does to free will, as well: abolishes it.

Of course, to argue that human actions are as much a function of necessity or natural laws as is every other natural event is not *necessarily* to abolish human freedom. As we have seen, so long as by "freedom" is meant nothing other than what Hobbes, for instance, means by it, "necessity" and "liberty" can be reconciled. Yet, insofar as this is

[769] Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," *Kant: Political Writings*, 41.

not what Kant means by freedom, in the very first sentence of his *Idea for a Universal History* he in effect undermines a key premise on which his entire moral philosophy is predicated.

As we saw in the previous chapter, in his *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant takes to task those who, by embracing the "wretched subterfuge" of compatibilism, "think they have solved" the problem of free will. They think, he argues, that "with a little quibbling about words" they have solved a problem which has plagued the human mind for millennia. For Kant, however, they have not so much solved this problem as they have rendered human freedom subordinate to necessity, and thus deprived human beings of their inherent dignity as rational as opposed to purely instinctual beings. For Kant, "compatibilists" like Hobbes or Hume are nothing other than soft-determinists who, in keeping with the "hard" ones, also deny what makes a human being human to begin with.

Still, as the first sentence of his *Idea for a Universal History* reveals, when it comes to expounding his philosophy of history, Kant is ironically enough no different. If we recall, in his letter to Borgius, Engels parrots an argument about the nature of the historical process initially advanced by Kant. In keeping with the latter, he argues that despite pursuing their own aims and interests, a "necessity" still reigns which makes it so all men, regardless of time and place, contribute to the execution of a "concerted plan" nonetheless. But if this the case—if a necessity still reigns which makes it so that all men, regardless of their individual actions, contribute to the execution of a concerted plan nonetheless—then human beings simply cannot be said to be free in the way that Kant, in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, maintains.

Upon reflection, therefore, whereas in his moral philosophy Kant argues that human beings are never to be treated as means but only as "ends-in-themselves," in his philosophy of history he in effect reduces entire generations of human beings to the "means" of a historical process that, over time, will issue in the establishment of a "perfect" constitution. "What remains disconcerting about all this," he therefore admits…

> is firstly, that the earlier generations seem to perform their laborious tasks *only for the sake of the later ones*, so as to prepare for them a further stage from which they can raise still higher the structure intended by nature; and secondly, that only the later generations will in fact have the good fortune to inhabit the building on which a whole series of their forefathers (admittedly, without any conscious intention) had worked without themselves being able to share in the happiness they were preparing.[770]

As Kant here reveals, the establishment of what he elsewhere calls a "kingdom of ends" (his version of the "immense grandeur" or "ideal perfection" that awaits humanity at the end of the long course it must still cover) has essentially *nothing to do* with individual human beings choosing, by their own volition, to live in accordance with a "categorical imperative." Rather, it has to do with the "unconscious" work done by generations of less than moral Machiavellian operators who will never themselves be able to share in the happiness they are unwittingly preparing for their Kantian descendants to enjoy. Simply put, despite the fact that it is our duty as rational beings to live by the moral law, there is, paradoxically, no role for moral persons to play in bringing about what nature, regardless of our intentions, guarantees. Moral persons are therefore left in the altogether awkward position of having to resist or moderate "the spread of amoral commercialization, the

[770] Kant, 44 (emphasis mine).

increase in war power, and the plotting revolutionary upheaval—*even while knowing that these movements are the true agents of historical progress."*[771]

As William Galston observes, this contradiction between Kant's moral philosophy, on the one hand, and his philosophy of history, on the other hand, is a contradiction that, despite being aware of it, Kant leaves "unresolved."[772] He never attempts to square his understanding of human freedom with the idea that history is "determined in accordance with natural laws, as is every other natural event"—and for good reason: from a purely philosophical standpoint, reconciling an incompatibilist understanding of human freedom with necessity is impossible.

As we saw in Chapter 4, in a letter dated November 17, 1853, Tocqueville takes issue with the fact that Gobineau's doctrine is "rather a sort of fatalism, of predestination if you wish but, at any rate, very different from that of St. Augustine, from the Jansenists, and from the Calvinists (the very last are closest to your doctrines), since you tie predestination and matter closely together."[773] Why? Because Tocqueville recognizes that despite its scientific pretense, there nevertheless exists a kinship between Gobineau's historical system, on the one hand, and what Montesquieu, as we have seen, calls the "dogma of the necessity of human actions" on the other. In other words, he recognizes that by designing an absolute historical system of the kind that not only shows how facts happened, but also, how they could not have happened otherwise, Gobineau has without

[771] Thomas L. Pangle and Peter J. Ahrensdorf, *Justice Among Nations: On the Moral Basis of Power and Peace* (University Press of Kansas, 1999), 208 (emphasis mine).
[772] William Galston, *Kant and the Problem of History*, 229–30. As Galston observes, this "problem" is "explicitly raised by Kant but left unresolved."
[773] Tocqueville to Gobineau, November 17, 1853, *Correspondence*, 227.

realizing it immanentized a fundamentally religious concept which also "vastly limits if not abolishes human freedom."

Important to recognize, however, is that insofar as Tocqueville argues that chance—as much as it affects everything that takes place on the world stage—is but a "skein of secondary *causes*," his own theory of history is in a way reminding of the theological concept of predestination, as well. Like Kant, Tocqueville presents himself as an incompatibilist.[774] His invocation of "free will" at the very end of his analysis of historians in democratic centuries, along with his insistence that the moral qualities of human beings play an important role in shaping the destines of nations, makes it seem as though human freedom is incompatible with the principle of causality--just as Rousseau argues in *The Second Discourse*.[775] Moreover and, as alluded to above, in an editorial footnote at the end *Democracy in America*, he insists that his "system," unlike that of "Mignet and company" is "*perfectly compatible* with human liberty."[776] But just as Augustine's conception of predestination assumes that "our wills are themselves included in the order of causes which is certain to God and contained within His foreknowledge," so Tocqueville's theory of history, his own historical "system," collapses our wills into a "skein of secondary causes that we call chance because we cannot untangle them."[777]

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[774] Marinus Richard Ringo Ossewaarde, *Tocqueville's Moral and Political Thought: New Liberalism* (Routledge, 2004), 87–88.
[775] Rousseau, *The Second Discourse*, 72. As Rousseau writes, "Nature commands every animal, and the beast obeys. Man feels the same impetus, but he recognizes that he is free to acquiesce or resist, and it is above all in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is shown. For physics in a way explains the mechanism of the senses and the formation of ideas, but in the power of willing, or rather of choosing, and in the feeling of this power are found only purely spiritual acts, about which nothing is explained by the laws of mechanics."
[776] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1284 (emphasis mine).
[777] Augustine, *City of God*, 201–2.

Tocqueville, it would therefore seem, reconciles free will with the principle of causality, after all. For like Augustine, he simply collapses it into an order of causality that human reason, given its limits, cannot penetrate.[778] According to Augustine, this order of causality remains impenetrable because, in accordance with the doctrine of Providence, God's mind remains unknown to us. But as we have seen, for Tocqueville it is not "necessary for God himself to speak in order for us to discover sure signs of his will; it is enough to examine the regular march of nature and the continuous tendency of events." Consequently, rather than collapse free will into an order of causality governed by the mysterious will of God, Tocqueville—following Montesquieu—collapses it into an unintelligible "skein of secondary causes" subject to more general ones. It is not that men are "blind instruments in the hands of God."[779] It is that men like Frederick the Great are the "agents" of a continuous tendency of events, beyond their control.[780]

In this way, then, Tocqueville's theory of history is also deterministic because while does not overtly affirm that necessity as opposed to fortune governs the world, it does preclude the possibility that history is simply absurd: that the historical process is nothing more or less than "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying

[778] For an excellent analysis of Augustine's conception of free will and how it relates to the belief that God or Providence governs the world, see Katherin Rogers, "Augustine's Compatiblism," *Religious Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (2004): 415-435. As Rogers observes, "On the basic question of the way the free will works, Augustine, though he does not use the term which is of recent coinage, is what we today would call a 'compatibilist.'"

[779] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 10.

[780] Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution,* 11. Curiously, in *The Ancient Regime* Tocqueville not only drops any reference to the notion that providence governs history, but also, makes an off-hand remark concerning the all too common rhetorical use of the words "Providence" and "providential" by his contemporaries. As he writes,

nothing."[781] No wonder he leaves his theory of history implicit and scattered; no wonder he "reproaches" himself "for seeming to fall in to the mania of the century." By reducing chance to a skein of secondary causes subject to more general ones, does he not also vastly limit, if not completely abolish, human freedom?

## TOCQUEVILLE'S "PROFOUNDLY AMBIGUOUS" THEORY OF HISTORY

While the answer to this question is far from self-evident, for our purposes it is important simply to recognize the following: that insofar Tocqueville's theory of history, rather like Augustine's understanding of causality in the world, carves out a space for that which given the limits of human reason, remains unintelligible, when compared to theories of history that in no uncertain terms *do* abolish human freedom, it at the very least remains open to the *possibility* that free will exists (even though it very well may not) and thus open to the *possibility* that human beings are in fact morally responsible for their actions (even if they very well may not be). Immediately prior to revealing what he "believes," in the *Recollections,* about causality in history, Tocqueville tells us that he "hates absolute systems that see all historical events as dependent on grand first causes linked together in ineluctable sequence, thus banishing individual human beings from the history of the human race."[782] In order to separate his own theory of history from these absolute systems, therefore, he insists that chance plays a major part in everything that takes places on the world stage and, in so doing, brings to our attention the essential

[781] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by A.R.B. Braunmuller (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 229. See also Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 18.
[782] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 45.

difference between the "philosophy of history," on the one hand, and "historical philosophy," on the other. [783]

According to Tocqueville, Montesquieu's history on the "grandeur and decadence of the Romans" is the "inimitable model in this genre" because it perfectly mixes "history in the narrow sense" with "historical philosophy," particular facts with general causes, chance occurrences with causal necessities.[784] It makes it so events like the altogether unexpected appearance of a man like Trajan in the history or Rome can occur, even in the midst of her otherwise *inevitable* decline.[785] As a result, unlike Marx's philosophy of history which, as we saw in Chapter 4, conflates the emergence of great men in history with the occurrence of any other natural event (whether it be a sunset or a flood), Montesquieu's historical philosophy never goes so far as to render human beings the product *exclusively* of their environment—and neither does Tocqueville's. For Tocqueville, man is more than just "Time" or history. As we saw in Chapter 3, he is a combination of Time and Space, history and nature. However malleable the human species may in fact be, then, for Tocqueville there is a permanency to human nature

[783] Robert Gannett Jr. "Tocqueville Unveiled: A Historian and His Sources in L'Ancien Regime et la Revolution Volume One," *Ph.D. Dissertation* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 64. As Gannett Jr. observes, "There has been debate among scholars about render Tocqueville's meaning of 'la philosophie historique.' Edward T. Gargan, for example, translates it as 'philosophical history' (*Alexis de Tocqueville: Years 1848-1851* (Catholic University of America Press, 1955), I91n), Harvey Mitchell translates it as 'philosophy of history (*Individual Choice,* 29n and 36-37), and Roger Boesche as 'historical philosophy' (*Selected Letters*, 256)." As Gannett Jr. also observes, however, Boesche's translation is best because not only is it "more literal," but also, "captures Tocqueville's meaning: the assessment of particular historical events so as to judge 'les causes diverses qui ont produit ceux-ci et les consequences qui en sont sorties.'" Following Jean-Claude Lamberti, Gannett rightly argues that the phrase "'philosophy of history' does not do justice to Tocqueville's quite different historical objective."
[784] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 257.
[785] Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, trans. by David Lowenthal (Hackett Publishing, 1999), 141. As Montesquieu presents it, Trajan's reign—under which it was "blessing to be born"—was a rare and, for all intents and purposes, an accidental exception to the general trend of events leading to Rome's otherwise inevitable decline.

which makes it so, however conditioned by their social, political, and physical, environment human beings no doubt are, it would be too reductionistic to argue that by making their own history, they are doing nothing more or less than "performing the task of their times." Thus, just as Montesquieu never goes so far as to argue that in the absence of a Trajan, another "Trajan" would have taken his place, so Tocqueville never goes so far as to argue that in the absence of Napoleon, another "Napoleon" would "invariably turn up."[786] To do so would be to make the same methodological error that not only Marx, but also, Thiers apparently made while writing his *History*. It would be to inadequately appreciate "the causes, intrinsic and extrinsic, which united to form Napoleon."

While historical philosophy is therefore much more scientific than narrative history, it is not so scientific as to render the historical process a tale told by a prophet, either. To be sure, it is tempting to regard Tocqueville, if not Montesquieu, as a kind of prophet—as a historian for whom like the Restoration liberals before him, the future can be predicted by conducting a scientific analysis of the past. Methodological statements like the one he makes at the beginning of his chapter on the "point of departure" of the Americans in *Democracy in America* appear to suggest just this. In keeping with Gobineau, he too is convinced that by going "back to the beginning," one can explain the "destiny of certain peoples who seem to be dragged by an unknown force toward an end unknown even to themselves."[787] Moreover, in a letter to Mme de Circourt in 1850, he

[786] Engels to W. Borgius, January 25, 1894, *Marx and Engels: Collected Works Vol. 50: Letters from 1892-1895*, 266.
[787] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 47.

admits to at times posing as a prophet.[788] But as discussed in the previous chapter, with the exception of America's beginning, Tocqueville recognizes that the beginnings of other nations (let alone the beginning of human history as a whole), are lost in the mists of time. In effect, for him the idea of the "philosophy of history" is essentially a non-starter. "With difficulty," he writes, "the human mind manages in a way to draw a great circle around the future; but within this circle chance, which escapes all efforts, is in constant motion. In the portrait of the future, chance always forms the obscure point where the sight of intelligence cannot penetrate."[789] Insofar as history is in part a labyrinth of chance, "science, in such a labyrinth, provides only incomplete conclusions and vague hypotheses."[790] At most, Tocqueville is a "probabilist:" a historian for whom, given the often "radical unpredictability" of social and political phenomena, there can be no "ultimate determination of any social aspect by another."[791]

Consequently, despite also being a historical determinist, Tocqueville's theory of history is, in keeping with Montesquieu's, much less "sociological," much more "political," and therefore much more "profoundly ambiguous" than those of the democratic historians he criticizes. If we recall, according to Tocqueville, whereas aristocratic historians prioritize the influence of individuals in determining the course of

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[788] Tocqueville, Alexis de, "Tocqueville to Mme. de Circourt, June 6, 1859," *Memoir, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville, Vol. 2,* 98. In keeping with his criticism of the "learned day dreams" of historians in the *Recollections*, Tocqueville writes the following: "I humbly confess (it is indeed humiliating for a man who has had some pretensions to prophecy) that I cannot see an inch in the darkness which surrounds us. I do not know how this can last, nor how it can end. *I feel as if I were tossed on a shoreless sea, with neither compass, nor sail, nor oars, and tired of vain efforts, I lie down in the stern of my boat and wait*" (emphasis mine).
[789] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.
[790] Tocqueville, 857.
[791] Hadari, *Theory in Practice*, 48.

history (and thus implicitly grant a kind of unfettered freedom from necessity to human beings) democratic historians prioritize the influence of general causes in determining even the smallest of "particular facts" (and thus implicitly deny that human freedom understood as something separate from necessity exists).[792] Put another way, whereas aristocratic historians commit the methodological error of exaggerating the undoubtedly important role that human beings play in determining their own political fate, democratic historians commit the methodological error of denying that role in its entirety. From the perspective of Tocqueville, however, just as democratic historians are wrong to deny that human freedom understood as something separate from necessity exists, so aristocratic historians are wrong to grant an unfettered freedom from necessity to human beings. For him,

> …there is no period when one part of the events of this world must not be attributed to very general facts, and another to very particular influences. These two causes are always found; only their relationship differs. General facts explain more things in democratic centuries than in aristocratic centuries, and particular influences fewer. In times of aristocracy, it is the opposite; particular influences are stronger, and general causes are weaker, as long as you do not consider as a general cause the very fact of inequality of conditions, which allows a few individuals to thwart the natural tendencies of all the others.[793]

So it follows that if Tocqueville's theory of history is also more democratic than aristocratic—more hostile to human freedom than it is friendly—that is only because his living in a democratic century demands it. Just as relying on general ideas is necessary for theorizing in general, so identifying general causes is necessary for theorizing about history in particular. But just as a good theorist must learn the art of weighing the generality of an idea against the number of particular cases that escape it, so a good

[792] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 853.
[793] Tocqueville, 856.

historian must learn how to weigh the influence of general causes against the influence of all of the "fortuitous and secondary causes" that are "infinitely more varied, more hidden, more complicated, less powerful, and consequently more difficult to disentangle and to trace in times of equality…"[794] This is an intellectual exercise that, whether out of intellectual sloth or vanity or both, the democratic historians Tocqueville criticizes fail to do. Gobineau, as we have seen, is case in point. But insofar as Tocqueville insists that "chance—or, rather, that skein of secondary causes that we call chance because we cannot untangle them—plays a major part in everything that takes places on the world stage," it is an exercise that Tocqueville understood (and increasingly so) as imperative for painting a portrait that was at once "strictly accurate" *and* "educational," which was his goal in writing both *Democracy in America* and *The Ancien Regime* to begin with.[795]

According to Tocqueville, historians who design systems like Gobineau's "consider a nation that has reached a certain place in its history and assert that it has been forced to follow the road that led it there." Tocqueville's aim in writing history, however, is to show "what it *could* have done to take a better route."[796] While he therefore strives, like any other historian, to make history intelligible, he nevertheless stops short of advancing, let alone systematically elaborating, a theory of historical change that attempts to make history predictable. As a historian for whom history is neither "a tale told by an idiot" (the product entirely of chance) *nor* a tale told by a prophet (the product entirely of necessity), his theory of history remains, like Montesquieu's before him, an

[794] Tocqueville, 855.
[795] Tocqueville, 16; Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, 5.
[796] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 858.

unsystematic and thus "profoundly ambiguous" one; for while it clearly limits human freedom by collapsing chance, and there with it, human agency into an unintelligible "skein of secondary causes," it never goes so far as to outright deny that human freedom exists and thus reduce human beings, however circumscribed their freedom may well be, to cogs in a historical machine.

On the whole, therefore, his theory of history remains much safer for democracy than those of his contemporaries for whom showing how facts happened is simply "not enough." These other theories of history, Tocqueville tells us, are both "false and cowardly." That they claim to be theoretically infallible, that they are "absolute," makes them not only "probably quite false," but also, undermining of the preservation of liberty and human dignity in a democratic age. But because Tocqueville always cultivates theory with a view to practice, because he always keeps his imagination tethered to the irreducibly complex nature of social and political reality, he never goes so far as to do the same. Their theories of history turn everything unexpected into the inevitable. Their theories of history transform disasters into epics, tragedy into farce, and teach a doctrine of fatality as a result.[797] However, insofar as Tocqueville's theory of history never goes so far as to convert the terror of the unforeseen into an altogether coherent drama of the past, it not only remains truer, but also, more ennobling.

[797] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," 594.

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